CHAPTER SIX

POPULISM

Political movements in a crisis period encompass both ideology and economic demands. Their proposals look to changes in the wider society and are in this sense broader than the proposals of interest groups. Their constituents, in deprived positions in society, require more large-scale changes. Moreover, in the disrupted position in which people find themselves during a crisis, they require some general explanation of the relation between narrow economic demands and their general welfare. Deprived of power, they are not likely to be motivated to act to change their situation by appeals to practical self-interest alone. Because the obstacles to surmount are so great, such appeals seem illusory and in fact often are. Therefore, some emotional appeals are essential; protest movements have crusade characteristics. The movements of farmers in the 1890's, workers in the 1930's, and Negroes in the 1960's have all been crusades. The emotional appeals of these movements transcend rationality defined in terms of Benthamite narrow self-interest. But narrow groups are specifically irrational in a crisis period because their methods can succeed neither in achieving results nor in attracting adherents.

To treat mass movements in pluralist terms is to make them a priori irrational. When they are viewed as responses to social crises, a different picture emerges. Populism must

be understood not as a foolish departure from interest group politics but as the product of the widespread and severe stresses of rapid industrialization and a serious depression.

The economic and cultural dislocation brought by industrialization has produced mass movements all over the world. These movements can take several forms. They can reject industrialization entirely and favor direct action and sabotage. This approach often dominated anarchist movements. They can reject any sort of liberal society, and seek to resolve economic and cultural problems with totalitarian control. This was the approach of fascism. They can seek to utilize industrialization to solve the problems it itself has created. This was the character of Marxism in Western Europe and Populism in America.

Adam Ulam has suggested that Marxism in Europe, in diverting resentment from the industrial process itself and onto the capitalist, socialized the working class to an acceptance of industrialization. Whereas the Luddites and anarchists fought the industrial work process itself, Marxist workers organized to fight the capitalists. In so doing they took the crucial step of accepting the industrial situation and working to improve their situation within it. Placing anti-industrial feeling in the service of industrial logic, revolutionary Marxism led to reformist trade unionism.[1]

In *The Paradox of Progressive Thought,* David Noble has made a parallel analysis of American progressivism. Hofstadter suggested that the progressives and Populists feared industrialization. But according to Noble, they reinterpreted it as a mechanism for freeing man from the burden of traditions and institutions and for reintroducing agrarian innocence into an advanced civilization.[2] In Ulam's terms, American reformers channeled a potential anti-industrial emotion in the direction of an acceptance of industrialization for the benefits it could bring if properly controlled. The parallel is exact, for the reformers focused their attacks not on the industrial process itself but on the particular bearers

of industrialization — in their terms, the plutocrats and the interests.

Populist rhetoric and the Populist program were anti-industrial capitalist not anti-industrial. In the words of one Populist paper, "The people do not want to tear down the railroads nor pull down the factories . . . They want to build up and make better everything." Another explained that the Populists "shall make of this nation an industrial democracy in which each citizen shall have an equal interest." Technology, the Populists argued, could be used to enslave man but also to liberate him.[3] *

True, the Populists opposed capitalists who were industrializing America. Does this make the capitalists progressive, the Populists reactionary? An analogous approach makes Stalinism in Russia into a progressive force because it, too, industrialized. Such overviews ignore the particular issues upon which conflict was joined. Conflict between Populists and conservatives was not about industrialization in the abstract, but about the control of railroads, the power of monopolies, the falling prices of crops, the benefits and dangers of inflation, big business control of politics, and other

* Many Populists, although not anti-industrial, were loath to admit that basic and irreversible changes in American society had caused the problems the farmer faced. Kansas Senator William Peffer began *The Farmer's Side* with a long, realistic description of the effect of industrialization and technology on the self-sufficient farmer. The farm situation, he wrote, had been produced not by the machinations or conspiracies of a few men but by the general development of the society. This evolution could not be reversed; rather the farmers should seek to benefit from it. But Peffer followed this section with another in which he blamed usury for all the farmers' troubles.[4] Here Peffer drew back from the real problems brought by industrialization. Money panaceas became a substitute for the more radical program implied by the earlier analysis. Clearly the two aspects of Peffer's argument are mutually contradictory. If industrialization is the cause of agrarian unhappiness, there is no possibility of going back to an earlier utopia. If usury and the evil actions of a few men explain everything, there is no need to deal with the basic problems brought by industrialization.

issues which could all have been met as the Populists desired without undermining industrialization.*

Had Populism attempted to escape from the problems brought by industrialization it would have relied on finding scapegoats, attacking freedom, and appealing to prejudice. Such a politics could rely — as McCarthyism relied — on the support of local elites. The democratic character of Populism flowed from its willingness to seek concrete, economic solutions to farmer grievances and to challenge local elites in the process.

Because they challenged those in power, Populists could appreciate freedom. They came to see the importance of social relationships rather than individual morality in explaining political attitudes. If conservatives could stress the individual corruption and evil conspiracies of a few men, reformers learned to look deeper.[7] They concentrated on specific economic grievances rather than vague, unfocused resentments. The very existence of agrarian radicals increased the alternatives in rural society, thereby promoting diversity.

Certainly there were aspects of Populism which make the modern observer uncomfortable. Populist leaders appealed to rural suspicion of the city and were unable to suppress their belief in rural superiority. The rural, fundamentalist Populist rhetoric made it difficult to attract urban allies, without which the movement was doomed. Many in the Populist crusade were cranky and narrow-minded. But a total assessment of Populism cannot be made so easily. Let us evaluate the movement in light of the specific pluralist attacks.

* Populists demanded a graduated income tax, government ownership or regulation of the railroads and the telegraph, control over monopoly, a lower tariff, increased education, direct election of senators, the secret ballot, the initiative and the referendum, an eight-hour day on government work, support for the labor movement, the free coinage of silver, a plan for government loans to farmers at low interest rates, and restriction on alien and corporate landholding.[5] If the Populists longed for a "rural utopia,"[6] this longing was not operational.

Some of these charges have to do with the general Populist ideology. Hofstadter has criticized the movement for its naïve belief in a natural harmony of society and a two-sided struggle between the people and the interests. These charges need not long detain us. The Populist rhetoric here derives from Lockean liberalism and was shared by conservatives as well as Populists. Conservatives and Populists attacked each other for interfering with the natural harmony of the world; each saw the other as a special interest. That reality is more complex than political slogans should surprise no one.[8]

More serious is the alleged Populist commitment to a conspiracy theory of history. As a rural movement with religious roots, Populism was especially prone to dramatize experience. It existed at a time when politics as a whole was played at this level. Where Populists saw conspiracies of bankers, conservatives feared anarchist conspiracies. There is little question that many Populist writers exhibited a conspiracy mentality. It is harder to come to an assessment of the importance of that mentality in the movement. Hofstadter argues that Populism was preoccupied with conspiracies. On the other hand, a recent study of Kansas Populism concludes that those who went to "international conspiracy" extremes were a small lunatic fringe of Populism.[9]

More than that, the Populists had been left behind by industrialization, left out of politics by the east and by their own local elites. There were, for example, virtually no farmers in local positions of party leadership in pre-Populist Kansas and Nebraska. But most of the local Populist leaders were farmers. Their perception of courthouse "rings" making political decisions was close to the truth.[10] Similarly, on the national level agreements and conspiracies between capitalists were an important part of industrialization. In the legal world, the American Bar Association played an important role in cementing close ties and informal contacts between judges and conservative lawyers.[11] Perhaps Henry Demarest Lloyd paid insufficient attention in *Wealth Against Commonwealth*

to the general laws of capitalist development in the creation of Standard Oil. Certainly Sumner and Spencer paid insufficient attention to the illegal acts and conspiracies of particular men.

In part, Hofstadter recognizes this and suggests a distinction between the perception of particular conspiracies and the perception of history as a conspiracy. This is an intellectually impeccable distinction, but one should not overestimate the ease of drawing it in the political practice of the late-nineteenth century.

Perhaps the most serious concrete charges laid against Populist ideology are the charges of nativism and anti-Semitism. According to Hofstadter, Populism activated most of American popular anti-Semitism. Viereck, Bell, Lipset, and Handlin all give currency to the allegation of Populist anti-Semitism.[12] It is particularly important to our argument here because in so far as Populists focused on Jews rather than economic targets they were failing to come to grips with the real problems of industrialization. This failure would have given an authoritarian cast to the movement. Thus Oscar Handlin specifically related Populist anti-Semitism to the movement's fear of the forces brought into play by industrialization — specifically, the Haymarket Affair, the Pullman Boycott, and the western mining strikes.[13]

The fact is, however, that the Populists sympathized with the Haymarket anarchists and were for the Pullman Boycott. The Populist governor of Colorado intervened for the workers in the Cripple Creek strike.[14] It is true that anti-Semitism would have been an alternative to an alliance with a rising labor movement. But while the evidence of Populist support for labor stands out,[15] the evidence of Populist anti-Semitism is very meager. A few Populists like Mary Ellen Lease seem to have been anti-Semitic. Moreover, one can find stereotyping of Jews in some Populist allegorical writing, like Donnelly's *Caesar's Column.*[16] The Jewish theme does not dominate *Caesar's Column,* and stereotyping of immigrant groups was

common practice in the late nineteenth century.[17] Donnelly is even sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, but his sympathy is part of an over-all animosity and distrust. Perhaps not unusual in the tawdry romantic novel of the period, Donnelly's portrayal of the Jewish characters is anti-Semitic by modern standards. One Jew heads the plutocracy and another is the evil genius of the revolution. The Jews had survived for hundreds of years under Christian tyranny, writes Donnelly, and now the Christians are paying "for the sufferings inflicted by their bigoted and ignorant ancestors on a noble race."[18]

The anti-Semitism in Donnelly's fantasy can be exaggerated, but if Populist rhetoric in general had been as anti-Semitic as *Caesar's Column,* the case for Populist verbal anti-Semitism would be made. However, the picture of Populist anti-Semitism has been created from slender evidence. Careful examination of tens of thousands of Populist newspapers, pamphlets, and books in Kansas and the other centers of midwestern Populism has uncovered no anti-Semitism in the collections of the state historical societies and only two or three references in the immense production of the Populist press.[19] As for the frequent references in Populist literature to the power of Shylock and the House of Rothschild, it is doubtful if these symbols had specific anti-Semitic connotations. In Kansas Populist literature, the House of Morgan was as frequent a Populist target as the House of Rothschild. The remaining examples of Populist anti-Semitism, such as the charge that Bryan's cross of gold peroration had anti-Semitic intent,[20] are extremely far-fetched. Comparing Populist "anti-Semitism" with the verbal anti-Semitism then common throughout the United States, the restrictions against Jews in respectable eastern society and the riots against Jews in the cities, it is possible to argue that the Populist movement was less anti-Semitic than late-nineteenth century America as a whole.

Although much is made of alleged Populist anti-Semitism,

little attention is paid to the resistance of southern Populism to anti-Negro rhetoric and activity. Racism was a tool of the conservatives, who sought to discredit and defeat the Populists by arousing the specter of Negro supremacy. Populist supporters in the south may have been anti-Negro, but during the Populist period it was more important to them to ally with Negro farmers along economic lines. In Georgia, Tom Watson attacked Democratic outrages against the Negro. At one point, a number of white Populist farmers rode all night to prevent the lynching of a Negro Populist. Moreover, agrarian reformers like Tillman who remained Democrats were as anti-Negro as their conservative opponents. It was the more radical, ideological, third-party Populists who defended Negro rights.[21]

What of alleged Populist hostility to foreigners? Populism is often interpreted as a revolt of native-born farmers, but outside the South there is virtually no basis for this impression. In the South, Populism tended to be strongest in the hill country of independent, Protestant, native-born farmers and weakest in the black belt. Populists received significant Negro support in some areas but did poorly among Mexicans and others of foreign stock.[22] In Iowa in 1892, the Populists also ran relatively best in the predominantly native-born counties and worse in the German and Scandinavian counties; but Populism generally was weak in Iowa. In Nebraska and the Dakotas, there was no relation between the proportion of native-born and Populism. In Kansas, the Populists scored successes in both native and foreign-born counties. Indeed, a higher percentage of immigrants ran for public office under the Kansas Populist banner than in either of the major parties.[23] Thus to relate the movement to Anglo-Saxon fear of immigration or old-American longing for a distant past is at best questionable.

The support of foreign ethnic groups for Populism varied somewhat from state to state. In Kansas, the Populists ran best in Irish, Bohemian, Welsh, and Danish precincts, and

worst in German, Russian-German, and particularly Mennonite and Swedish precincts. In Nebraska, the Populists did poorly in German, Bohemian, and Catholic areas. Over the Plains states as a whole, Norwegians and Danes seem consistently to have given disproportionate support to Populism and Catholics, Germans, and Russian-Germans to have provided a source of opposition.

Populism could have blamed the changes taking place in America on foreigners[24] and sponsored nativist legislation. Indeed, there was some antiforeign sentiment among local Populists in some areas,[25] although research has failed to uncover significant Populist nativism on the Great Plains. That unfriendliness toward immigrants existed in the Populist movement conflicted with the belief that America was and should be the home of the oppressed.[26] Thus Weaver, running for President in 1892, repudiated a restrictionist plank in the 1892 Populist platform. The plank was only there at the request of the Knights of Labor. The Knights feared competition from cheap foreign labor, a fear that led the AFL also to favor immigration restriction. Similarly, in Kansas the Populists only accepted immigration restriction at the behest of the Knights of Labor. Eastern Republicans were much more unambiguously for immigration restriction than were the Populists.[27] The Populist platforms did always include planks calling for a prohibition on alien ownership of land. These planks were not nativist in motivation, but were directed against the ownership of land by large foreign corporations and by nonresidents who held the land for speculative purposes.

Britain was the one country toward which the Populists were hostile. In part, this was antiaristocratic prejudice (which also motivated someone like Carnegie); in part, it was caused by the ties of Wall Street and Grover Cleveland to British bankers.[28] The significance of Irish influence within Populism on this score also should not be discounted.

There is no significant evidence of jingoism in Populist foreign policy. The Populists on the whole favored Cuban

liberation but opposed the Spanish American War and the annexation of Cuba and the Philippines.[29] As was the case with nativism, the more moderate progressives were more often jingoist in foreign policy than the "extremist" Populists. Much of the evidence cited of Populist jingoism is perverse indeed. The assertion of an anti-Populist Congressman that McKinley's foreign policy was hurting the Populists (because they opposed it) clearly suggests that the Populists lost support because they were *not* jingoist. Similarly, to derive Populist jingoism from jingoist attitudes in "Populist areas" is not only to confuse the party with its social base but also to overlook a conservative opposition to Populism that was always either dominant or extremely powerful in "Populist areas." That there is a jingoist tradition in the Middle West is not at issue; the question is the relation of the Populist movement to that tradition.[30]

As for Populist attitudes toward Catholics, Catholics did tend to vote against the Populist party, but this seems as likely to have been due to Catholic characteristics as Populist ones. The Populists often sought fusion with the Catholic party, the Democrats. Moreover, the American Protective Association reached its height in the Populist period. This was an anti-Catholic organization, but it was not involved with the Populists. The APA was strongest in the old Middle West, where Populism was virtually nonexistent. Aside from being anti-Catholic, the APA was strongly anti-Populist. It attacked the Populists with the kind of moralistic language attributed so often to the Populists.[31] The Populists made moralistic attacks on the APA in the name of individual freedom. They accused Republicans in many states of being tools of the APA, and in fact the Republican parties often did have APA connections.[32]

The Populist Crusade

If specific charges of jingoism and anti-Semitism fail, what of the general view of Populism as a moral crusade, destruc-

tive of individual differences and privacy? One should not underestimate the elements of a crusade in Populism.

Populism was a Protestant revival in an already intolerant rural setting. There was in rural society little attention paid to the freedom of individuals as individuals. Individual freedom was enforced, if at all, by group power rather than by neutral societal institutions concerned with the protection of individual rights. In practice, the individual Hatfield might be protected by his family against the individual McCoy, the individual Congregationalist by his church against the Anglicans. In theory, there were few institutionalized protections for minority rights. For John Locke, the theorist of rural liberalism, homogeneity seemed to obviate the need for minority safeguards. The major protections entirely altered the relationship between the individual and the society — the right to leave and the right of revolution.[33] With the growth of an urban society, anonymity and individual freedom grew too. Bureaucratic structures concerned with restraints on government arose. Supreme Court interpretations of the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment to guarantee individual liberties are strikingly a twentieth-century phenomenon, as is the growth of the American Civil Liberties Union.[34]

Frederic Howe captured the flavor of rural society well when he described his boyhood in Meadville, Pennsylvania:

> One could be sharp in business, possibly corrupt in politics, but one should not forget that life was a serious business, that duty should be always before one's eyes, that one should be diligent in things distasteful, and that self-fulfillment meant getting on in the world, being assiduous to church-going, rather exhibitive in attendance on revivals, the holding to one's particular church denomination, and the avoidance of even the appearance of careless morals, drinking or association with men of questionable opinions.
>
> The other important thing was to live as other men lived, do as other men did, avoid any departure from what other men thought. Not to conform was dangerous to one's reputation.

> Men who had strange ideas, who protested, who thought for themselves, were quietly ostracized.[35]

As Howe recognized, much of the evangelicalism and intolerance of this rural environment went into the reform movements. Indeed, the roots of Populism in a grass roots, evangelical Protestant mentality cannot be exaggerated. The Populist revolt called forth perhaps the most intense and widespread political involvement in American history. As the historian of the Texas People's Party puts it,

> Populism sprang from the soil. It came into being in many sections of the state within the space of a brief period almost as if by pre-arrangement, yet there was no relation between the various local phases of the movement aside from that provided by the common conditions from which all grew. It was, then, in its incipient stages a spontaneous, almost explosive force.[36]

Progressivism was primarily an elite phenomenon. Populism was a mass uprising. Farmers traveled miles with their families to large camp meetings. They read the immense outpouring of the Populist press, passing the pamphlets and newspapers from hand to hand. They filled local schoolhouses in the evenings, and participated in politics in hundreds of counties throughout the Great Plains and the South. The major parties could count on traditional loyalties, and their local organizations were often moribund. The Populists would have been lost without the remarkable activity of their grass roots supporters.[37]

The revivalist character of this mass uprising is striking. Ministers and ex-ministers were active in the movement; the camp meetings resembled nothing so much as religious revivals. Populist gatherings were sober affairs, suspicious of luxury and full of religious paraphernalia. The party was known as the party of righteousness, and such groups as the Germans feared for their Sunday cards and beer.[38]

Surely this supports the perception of the movement as a

dangerous, mass fundamentalist crusade, particularly in light of the Scopes trial, the 1920's Ku Klux Klan, and the more recent manifestations of fundamentalist extremism.

The rural, Protestant Populist environment hardly seems fertile soil for a tolerant, democratic, forward-looking politics. But analyzing the Populist crusade as a product of the intolerance of rural respectability misses a fundamental point. To be an agrarian radical was to challenge respectability. The dominant institutions of nineteenth century rural America — church, press, politicians, local business elites — were all opposed to agrarian radicalism. The established elites owed their political power in part to the cultivation of intolerance; to moralistic appeals to patriotism, Americanism and the like; to religious fundamentalism; and to the power of conformity. Agrarian radicalism in part participated in this style of politics but in a more basic sense had to combat these methods of political control.

Certain kinds of crusades under certain circumstances destroy privacy and individual differences. But the circumstances in which Populism found itself are important. Because it was a minority movement against powerful elites, because it was in an American tradition of individualism and freedom, the movement could see many of the advantages of free speech and privacy. Thus Populists pushed for the introduction of a secret ballot. Nor did Populist "Americanism" cause them to persecute the opposition. Like agrarian radicals during World War I, Populists were the victims of superpatriotism rather than its perpetrators.

There are three specific areas in which the Populist crusade is alleged to have interfered with freedom. The first of these is in the university. In the Populist and progressive periods there was considerable interference with academic freedom, for academic tenure was not firmly institutionalized as it is today. Although many writers cite Populist interferences with academic freedom,[39] in point of fact there is only one example. In Kansas, the Populists ignored academic tenure in

reorganizing the Kansas State Agricultural College. This was not, it should be pointed out, because they were suspicious of "overeducation"; they rather had a somewhat naïve faith in what education could accomplish. In Kansas, they desired to introduce a liberal arts curriculum into an exclusively agricultural college.[40] In this case the interference with academic freedom resulted not from anti-intellectualism but from enthusiasm for education. This is not the sort of mentality traditionally associated with attacks on academic freedom. Moreover, the view that the populist attitudes of the American masses make them anti-intellectual ignores the crucial question of which particular elites (if any) are going to lead anti-intellectual crusades or give in to them. On the whole, in America these functions have been performed by conservative elites, and radical intellectuals like Thorstein Veblen have been the victims. The Populists were not the fathers of modern witch-hunts.

Populist support for prohibition is also cited as evidence for the dangerous effects of the Populist crusade. It is true that Populist voters tended to support prohibition referenda and that prohibition was one of the progressive reforms associated with the initiative, the referendum, and female suffrage.[41] In part, this was because liquor interests played a corrupt role in state politics. In part, it was because temperance, like economic reform, was seen as a necessary precondition for individual advancement. In part, it was out of simple intolerance for the habits of particular ethnic groups and urban classes. However, a proviso should be entered here. In the early days of the prohibition movement, the Prohibition Party platform was generally radical. In the 1890's Prohibition platforms resembled Populist platforms. However, the real cultivation of rural ignorance and prejudice came not in this period, but with the rise of the practical, single-interest, conservative Anti-Saloon League.

Moreover, our concern is not only with the attitude of Populist constituents toward prohibition but the attitude of

the movement itself. At the county level, Populists and Prohibitionists often had close relationships. Some state Populist parties, as in North Dakota, endorsed prohibition. It was more common, however, for the movement to steer away from that controversial issue, as it did in South Dakota, Iowa, Texas, and generally in Kansas.[42]

Another charge leveled against the Populist crusade is that it sought to destroy representative democracy. Here again one must measure Populist practice against the claims of its opponents. While many Populists favored the initiative and the referendum, the political reforms most stressed by the Populists were the secret ballot and the direct election of senators. Certainly the Populists sought to challenge the political and economic power of those who dominated American society at the turn of the twentieth century. Certainly the direct election of senators increased the power of the people vis-à-vis the elites. But it is highly dubious that such a Populist reform was a threat to representative democracy. Finally, the Populist attacks on the courts indicate disregard for law and order not so much by the Populists as by the courts themselves. In 1895 alone, the Supreme Court invalidated the income tax and refused to apply the Sherman Act to the sugar monopoly while upholding Debs' conviction under it.[43] This consistent, narrow partiality in interpreting the laws and the constitution explains Populist attitudes better than deductions concerning "plebiscitory democracy."

That Populism was in significant measure a Protestant crusade is impossible to deny. It is also true that the conditions permitting a movement of this sort to focus on concrete economic reforms were fast disappearing. Nevertheless, charges that the Populists were authoritarian are not supported by the evidence. Particularly in contrast to the politics it opposed, Populism was clearly a democratic phenomenon.

Are we required, then, to call Populism an example of class rather than status politics? In the categories of class and status politics, we meet the issue of moralism and pragmatism

in another form. For the Beardians, Populism was a pragmatic class movement, representing the special interests of farmers as other groups represented the special interests of their constituencies.[44] The pluralists have seen that Beardian analysis cannot describe the Populist movement successfully. However, in their distinction between "class" and "status" politics they have not transcended Beardian categories. Accepting the narrow Beardian definition of an economic movement and finding that Populism was more than this, they have underplayed its economic character. Rather than transcending the Beardian analysis, they have stood it on its head.

Hofstadter, for example, implicitly interprets Populism as an example of status politics. Distinguishing between the hard and the soft side of the agrarian spirit, he writes,

> The farmer's commercial position pointed to the usual strategies of the business world: combination, cooperation, pressure politics, lobbying, piecemeal activity directed toward specific goals. But the bathos of the agrarian rhetoric pointed in a different direction: broad political goals, ideological mass politics, third parties, the conquest of the "money power," the united action of all labor, rural and urban.

Relating this to Populism, Hofstadter explains that in bad times the farmer rejected his role as a capitalist and "withdrew into the role of the injured little yeoman." The Farmers Alliance and the Populist Party had their hard side (business methods, pressure politics), he says, but as the depression deepened the soft Populist rhetoric triumphed and all issues were dropped for the silver panacea.[45]

In order to make the progressive movement an example of status politics, Hofstadter argues that status politics is born of prosperity. This will not do for the Populists; since they flourished during a depression, they would become a class political phenomenon. But Hofstadter reserves class politics for narrow interest groups. The term would place the Populists in an incorrect and — for him — too favorable light. He therefore first treats the Populist party as an irrational

response to crisis; it appears to be an example of status politics. He then turns to the achievements of practical farm organizations with narrow economic goals. According to him these were associated with agricultural prosperity. This was the same period of prosperity that produced progressive status politics.[46]

Hofstadter could overcome the contradiction here explicitly by excepting rural politics from the normal class-status cycle. But this would hardly render his treatment of Populism itself more convincing. For while Populism was certainly more than a narrow pressure group, it was still an economic movement making practical demands. As C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, the Populist demands did not ignore economics but rather were "obsessively economic."[47] The business ventures of the Farmers Alliance were in part examples of farmer unwillingness to come to terms with industrial capitalism. In shifting to politics, the farmers recognized the insufficiency of purely business methods. The politicizing of the Alliance was not simply the result of self-pity; the depression rendered nonpolitical solutions futile. In fact, Hofstadter himself later attributes a measure of success to the third party.[48] Finally, if "the bathos of agrarian rhetoric" produced the free silver panacea as well as the third party, why did free silver destroy both the third party and the general third-party demands? The answer is that free silver did not dominate third-party Populism. It was rather the panacea of the more conservative (and practical?) Democrats like Bryan who were too conservative to make demands for basic changes in American society; they preferred panaceas. Indeed, free silver did not dominate the Populist movement until, in its practical desire to win power, it sought fusion with the Democrats. Here is the ultimate irony; Hofstadter damns Populism for the practical, opportunistic concern for power at the expense of broad, ideological principles — the very politics that wins his praise when practiced by the major parties.

Hofstadter's treatment makes of Populism an irrational,

unnecessary movement. This is also the consequence of other pluralist arguments. In Kornhauser's scheme, mass movements arise when the masses are available for mobilization and the elites are accessible to influence from below. In his analysis, the only societies where the masses are available but the elites inaccessible are totalitarian.[49] Surely some finer distinctions are in order. One would like to know which elites are accessible and which inaccessible. To which constituencies are elites accessible, to which inaccessible? By what methods are elites accessible, and what methods will they resist or ignore?

In a basic sense, the elites in America are accessible to popular influence, but mass movements generally arise because of the inaccessibility of elites to the interests of the members of mass movements and in this sense their inaccessibility to the pressure group politics of pluralism. Thus in Populist states, politics was often controlled from outside and the elites that made political decisions were not accessible to the bulk of people. On the national level, the elites were also inaccessible. Particularly important here was the role of the Supreme Court in rejecting legislation that reformers were able to pass. Because the Supreme Court was not accessible to reform influence, it played the role of radicalizing political discontent.[50]

Other factors besides the inaccessibility of elites obviously contribute to the rise of mass movements and determine their character. But whether the movements are democratic or totalitarian, their appearance is related to the inaccessibility of elites.[51] By basing mass movements on the accessibility of elites, Kornhauser denies them the possibility of being a rational response to social crises. For if the elites are accessible, mass movements are unnecessary.

Similarly, when Kornhauser writes that the "objects" of mass movements are "remote" and do not "directly concern the individual,"[52] he again makes mass movements irrational by definition. Interest rates, railroads, corporations, and the

money supply certainly concerned the Populist farmers directly. And the Populists were perfectly reasonable in believing that control over railroads, interest rates, corporations, and the money supply was exercised in places remote from the Great Plains. Would they have been more rational to focus their anger on neighboring shopkeepers?

Just as the distinction between moralism and pragmatism cannot contain the Lockean ideology, so the distinctions between proximate and remote concerns, class and status politics, cannot contain agrarian radicalism. As conceived of by the pluralists, class (proximate) politics are concerned with immediate economic group self-interest, status (remote) politics with position in the social structure. Class politics seek gains for the value of the gains themselves (more money, better working conditions, tax benefits, and so forth). Status politics seeks gains because of what they signify (conspicuous consumption, keeping up with the Jones, demonstrating Americanism vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxons, etc.). Contrary to the pluralist view, periods of prosperity and satisfaction seem to produce both status and class politics in America. As de Tocqueville recognized, in America these are not so different. The group scramble that dominates politics during prosperity involves both "status" concerns and direct, narrow, economic advancement. In a crisis period, however, neither interest-group nor status politics can succeed. In the Populist period, "business methods" were doomed to failure. Similarly, in Wisconsin during the 1930's depression a precursor of McCarthy attempted to win office on the ("status") issue of communism.[53] Ignoring the economic grievances of the people, he was soundly beaten.

Populism, like Marxism, sought to combine a general program for the political control of industrialization with the concrete demands of a significant social force. But the Populist movement was hardly revolutionary. For better or worse, neither the movement nor the farmers it represented wanted to free themselves from the Lockean inheritance.

Rural Insurgency

Marxism was revolutionary; Populism was not. But this was hardly the only difference between them. If agrarian radicalism played a role in America analogous to the role of Marxism in Europe, then in a sense American farmers took the place of European workers.[54] In Europe industrialization uprooted the peasants from the land and brought them to the cities, where they became revolutionary workers. But the uprooted European peasants who settled in American cities remained conservative. In America the farmers who stayed on the land played the role of European workers as the major force challenging industrial capitalism.

How is this to be explained? The absence of feudalism on the one hand hindered the development of working-class consciousness. On the other hand it provided a yeoman farming class instead of a tradition-bound peasantry. The commitment to individual mobility obstructed the rise of socialist consciousness among workers, but it fostered agrarian radicalism. Farmer mobility, farmer experience in self-help, farmer cooperation along the frontier, all enabled farmers to organize politically. They did not require a Napoleonic leader to represent them. Moreover, fascism, feudal in its corporateness and in its attack on individualism, was less likely to appeal to American farmers. And as the class most committed to self-help and individual success, they reacted bitterly against the neofeudal society they saw being created around them.

For three-quarters of a century after the Civil War, there were continual movements of rural protest in the western Middle West. Movements like Populism and 1920's progressivism arose in response to specific agricultural depressions. But depressions alone cannot explain the continual strength of agrarian radicalism in this period. Both farmers and progressives prospered in the decade before World War I. The Non-Partisan League was organized in North Dakota during prosperity and declined during depression. One must look

beyond depressions to the long-term structural situation of the American farmer.

The greater exposure of agriculture to international market conditions after the Civil War increased the instability of agricultural life. To compound dependence on the market, newly settled farmers usually produced a single crop; this exposed the farmers not only to market conditions in general but to the widespread fluctuations in the price of a single commodity. Moreover, farming methods had not yet made much impact on the hazards of weather on the Great Plains. Agrarian radicalism has always been stronger in the wheat than in the corn-hog areas. Wheat farming depends more on the weather and on other events over which the farmer has no control. The wheat farmer is traditionally inclined to take the help he can get from outside sources like the government. Corn-hog farming, on the other hand, depends far more on the day-to-day activities of the individual farmer. The conservative, antigovernment commitment to rugged individualism is more meaningful in the corn belt.

The Populist-progressive era was close to the period of settlement. One cannot speak with certainty about the influence of the frontier, but it seems reasonable to suppose that the frontier unsettled tradition and increased the effort to meet problems through political self-help.[55] As the frontier influence declined, these areas became more conservative.

Ethnic traditions also contributed to political protest. The West North Central states plus Wisconsin had far higher percentages of foreign-born in their populations than the states of any other region in the country. This concentration of the foreign-born was particularly striking compared to other rural areas. Early studies showed a tendency for the foreign-born to support protest movements more than native-stock Americans. The research here provides no similar evidence within the progressive states. But if the foreign-born as a whole did not disproportionately support agrarian radicalism at the same time, different groups of foreign-born

perpetuated it at different times. Scandinavians and Germans were concentrated in the western Middle West. The Scandinavians consistently supported Populism and progressivism. The Germans, usually resistent to agrarian radicalism, kept it alive during and after World War I.

One might argue, moreover, that ethnic conflict provided a challenge to the political systems in the West North Central states. In the eastern cities, this challenge was met by the machine. In the countryside such a solution was impractical for several reasons — the different character of the ethnic groups, the contrasts in urban and rural political styles, the visibility of economic targets for resentment, the conditions of agriculture, the strength of a tradition of agrarian revolt, the greater isolation within rural areas. Therefore, ethnic dissatisfaction focused on broader class and political goals.[56]

Political conditions added their weight to economic and cultural factors. Politically, the farmers of the Middle West were isolated from the centers of power in the society. This did not mean that they were ignorant of the problems of the larger society so much as it meant that the larger society did not understand their problems. The midwest rural world lacked the power to make the outside political elites sensitive to agrarian demands and moderate on agrarian issues. Political control in the trans-Mississippi West was more nakedly in the hands of railroads and other businesses than was the case in states with a longer political tradition. In many instances, the western states were controlled by outside railroads and corporations. This elite inaccessibility provoked radical demands and radical movements.

Agrarian society, however, was not static. The changes that had produced agrarian radical movements finally undermined them. Consider for the moment only the decline in farm population. In 1860, 59.7 percent of all workers in the country worked on farms. By 1900, the figure was down to 35.7 percent.[57] Farmers were no longer a majority of the population. The decline in the relative number of farmers

continued in the twentieth century. From 1920 to 1944, there was a large net migration from the farms. In the West North Central states, where agrarian radical movements had flourished, this decline was especially pronounced. Between 1920 and 1944, the net migration from farms in the West North Central states averaged about 2 percent for each four-year period.[58] By 1950 less than 15 percent of the total United States population lived on farms.* Thus, if farmers in America played the role of workers in Europe, workers were the wave of the industrial future on both continents. A farmer-labor alliance in the 1890's might have altered the course of American development, but labor was turning in a different direction. Workers voted against Bryan in 1896, and Gompers had earlier refused to ally the AFL with the Populist Party. As he interpreted working class mentality, it was through with the middle-class radicalism that had permeated the labor movement since Jacksonian days. Before the rise of the AFL, the aim of working-class organizations had been to keep the class structure fluid, to provide for social mobility. This led to alliance with "the people" (farmers and others of the small middle class) rather than to specific class action and specific job-oriented demands. In joining purely class-oriented craft unions, workers accepted the permanency of the wage-earning status for themselves if not for their children. When European workers organized on a class basis, they recognized their wage-earning status only in order to challenge the permanency of a system which had wage-earning statuses in it. But in America, class action was a substitute for a general challenge to the industrial capitalist system.

The class organizations of American workers, then, tended

* Moreover, those who have left the farms have been primarily young people. The older rural residents, traditionally more conservative, have therefore become a greater political force.[59] This exodus from the farms to the cities has provided an urban safety valve for rural discontent.[60]

not to participate in broad movements of social change from the Populist period through the 1920's. (However, at certain times and in selected areas some American workers allied themselves with socialism and progressivism.) After the defeat of Populism, agrarian radicalism continued to flourish to the First World War and beyond. But the New Deal and the rise of the CIO reoriented American politics. Workers came to supply the main base of reform, not in alliance with rural areas but against them. Farmer leadership in American radicalism had come to an end.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE REFORM IMPULSE

The Progressive Heritage

The decline of the Knights of Labor in the 1880's and the defeat of the Populist Party ten years later initiated a new era in American politics. Narrow interest groups — the American Federation of Labor and the American Farm Bureau Federation — rose to take the place of protest movements which had attempted to organize all farmers, all workers, or all common men.[1] During the same period, the urban machine, product in large part of the growth in city size and the influx of immigrants, came to dominate America's cities. Just as the AFL organized workers on narrow craft lines — carpenters, plumbers, printers — so the machine organized its constituents on narrow ethnic lines — Irish, Italians, Jews. Like the Farm Bureau and the AFL, the urban machine sought to supply narrow tangible favors. The jobs, contracts, food baskets, and police protection which the machine provided corresponded to the AFL's concentration on wages, hours, and working conditions and the Farm Bureau's concern with demonstration farms, marketing coops, and parity.[2] Each of these narrowly based organizations followed the line of least resistance; they satisfied the immediate demands of their constituents and challenged the power struc-