The Populist Scare of the 1890s – And the Aftermath that Changed American Populism

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Donald Trump's behavior as candidate and as president make him disturbingly comparable to foreign populist leaders -- such figures as the late Hugo Chavez, Rafael Correa, Rodrigo Duterte, Recep Erdogan, Nicolás Maduro (Chavez's successor), Evo Morales, and Viktor Orban. Yet in calling Donald Trump a populist we also necessarily tap an American well. Populism was invented here in America.   Indeed there is a rich and suspenseful past to recover when we use the word "populist."

In 1892 the People's Party ran a third party presidential candidate in 1892, ex-Union Army General James Weaver of Iowa. By 1896 Populists appeared poised to occupy the presidency. The People's Party coordinated that year with the Democratic party in running a jointly nominated candidate, William Jennings Bryan. The idea was to "fuse" the Democratic electorate and the new pools of third-party voters in Western and Southern states. The tactic startled Republicans. Grover Cleveland's disastrous second term as president, and the sharp business downturn that began in 1893, primed them to think that the presidency would switch columns. The 1896 contest abruptly appeared uncertain – and certain to be hard fought.[1]

In the rest of this paper I show how profoundly interesting – and on the whole admirable -- that unsettling Populism of the 1890s was. Second, I stress that "small-p" populism *later* in American history was, in contrast, candidate-centered, demagogic, ideologically shallow and intellectually incoherent. Think here of Huey Long and George Wallace. Third, there is a connection between the two stories – as we will see when I treat the transformation in electoral institutions wrought by Southern Democrats in Populism's aftermath. In trying to insure themselves against a second Populist moment Democrats inadvertently but quite effectively created a petri dish for the menacing kind of populism that came later.

My hope in sketching how populism originated and then evolved in the U.S is to provide essential historical background for discussion of contemporary populism. To be clear, I am

not drawing direct connections between past and present. But history and political science

both agree that one is more likely to come up with a good answer to "what is happening now?"

if one has a sure sense of the actual historical resonances in the analytic vocabulary that we

use.

1892-1894: The Great Populist Quadrennium

The People's Party broke onto the national scene in 1892 by waging a presidential campaign

vigorous enough to capture four Western states and North Dakota. The party also gained

governorships in Colorado, Kansas, and North Dakota, won eleven seats in the U.S. House,

and elected 3 Senators of the 53rd Congress.[2] Minnesota's Ignatius Donnelly, an erstwhile anti-

slavery Republican, Farmers Alliance activist, and a prolific novelist, wrote the preamble –

and its literary merit still shines through.[3] It called for a tax-financed system of "sub-

treasuries" that would support a flexible currency and regulate commodity supply. The

platform called too for silver coinage and nationalization of the railroads.[4]

That platform sprang from years of debate and discussion among agrarian social

movements of the South and West. Their participants built a vast system of popular

education and debate, featuring itinerant lecturers, reform newspapers, book clubs, and

discussion groups.[5] The point of such popular education was helping ordinary men and

women, both black and white,[6] who were enmeshed in commercial agriculture to explain to

themselves –and thus to think through how jointly to cope with -- a secular deflation that

saddled them with debt. They also puzzled over their lack of access to agricultural credit and

their difficulties in marketing agricultural commodities through intermediaries such as

railroads and furnish merchants. With its call for a sub-treasury system, nationalization of the

railroads, and a "flexible" national currency disconnected from gold, the 1892 platform clearly addressed such concerns.

Having bid for entry into the party system the People's Party then caught a break. Just after its national and state-level debut a grave economic crisis struck the country – the Panic of 1893. The national unemployment rate in 1892 is estimated to have been 3.7%; a year later it ran at 8.1%; in 1894 it climbed to 12.3%. Banks failed; the secular and deflationary strains on commercial agriculture deepened.[7]

This was the backdrop to an unprecedented standoff between the administration of Grover Cleveland, on the one hand, and on the other organized railway workers, who were backed by the Governor of Illinois, John Altgeld in their strike against the Pullman Company. In 1894, the American Railway Union, led by Eugene Debs, staged the most important labor strike in American history to that point. The President of the United States eventually smashed the strike with the United States Army. That same year the first march on Washington occurred – "Coxey's Army," a colorful march of the unemployed led by a Populist, Jacob Coxey with his son, Legal Tender Coxey, in tow. In 1895 the Supreme Court swung hard to the right, opening up an abyss between judicial review and popular aspiration. The Court struck down the income tax and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. For good measure it unanimously upheld the federal labor injunction against the railway strike – the enforcement of which had led to the military intervention.[8]

All of this affected the 1896 platform of the People's Party. It became a farmer-labor platform, the first such presidential platform in American history. It called for an end to labor injunctions. To combat unemployment it called for a public works program. Monetary policy should respond to the crisis: "We demand the volume of circulating medium be speedily

increased to an amount sufficient...to restore the just level of prices of labor and production." The railroads should be nationalized. The income tax should be restored.[9]

But Bryan, the 1896 fusion candidate, ignored the farmer-labor platform and campaigned instead on the first item in the Democratic platform, "The Money Plank:" "...the money question is paramount to all others...we demand the free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the present legal ratio of *16 to 1*...Gold monometallism is a British policy...It is not only un-American but anti-American..." (emphasis added)[10]

The McKinley campaign – through a program of shuttling worker delegations into Canton, Ohio to personally meet with McKinley – pictured this inflationary program as certain to sharply dilute wage earners' purchasing power. Mobilizing the Grand Army of the Republic, Republicans sounded the inflationary alarm to veterans' pensioners (a constituency aided by the Disability and Pension Act of 1890, passed at the behest of President Harrison.) By then 64% of Union veterans were pensioners. The larger point is that the Republican triumph of 1896 was, for its protagonists, hard-won, seemingly the result of a vast and highly coordinated effort to save the nation from Bryan and Populism. Indeed, the 1896 presidential campaign was, in real terms, the most expensive presidential campaign in American history. Those who considered Populism a clear and present danger effectively rallied to save the republic.[11]

Smashing Opposition

After 1896 Populism collapsed. But this did not happen as we might think – that is, having flirted with third party politics voters then drifted back to the major parties. Some of that happened, yes. But the rules of the game were rewritten to push Populists out. Outside the South this meant "fusion bans" – which in some places actually had unintended party-building effects, such as later encouraging construction of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor

Party.[12] Within the South matters differed: Democrats sharply shrank the electorate, they

shut down party competition, and they instituted one-party regimes.

Before the Populist scare Southern Democrats certainly manipulated electoral institutions

to their advantage – and they rarely hesitated to attempt outright fraud by stuffing or

discarding ballots. In time a different prospect emerged: black formal-legal

disenfranchisement. In 1889 and 1890 Florida and Mississippi, respectively, changed their

election rules in order to push black adult male voters out of the electorate.[13]

But the emergence of Populism in 1892 – and the ensuing Populist quadrennium --

suddenly reconfigured this turn toward formalization of exclusion. Southern Populists meant

to put the region's electoral institutions back in play. (Earlier Republicans tried to do just that

with the Federal Elections Bill of 1890 but failed by one vote in the 51st Congress.)[14] The 1896

People's Party platform spotlighted the integrity of Southern elections: "...the People's party

condemn the wholesale system of disfranchisement adopted in some of the States as

unrepublican and undemocratic, and we declare it to be the duty of the several State

Legislatures to take such action as will secure a full, free and fair ballot and honest count."[15]

Moreover, Southern Populists regarded black Republicans as potential allies, not useful

enemies to be demonized for supporting Reconstruction. If they could fuse with Republicans

(although weak they were by no means dead) then Populists would. Such fusion provided a

shortcut to parity with Democrats and a return in the region to an effective two-party system.

In 1896, a Populist-Republican bi-racial fusion insurgency nearly seized control of Louisiana;

only violence and fraud held the state for Democrats. That same year in North Carolina a

similar bi-racial fusion insurgency succeeded. Two years later, Democrats won the state back

through a paramilitary campaign involving armed Red Shirts.[16]

The fraud and violence in Louisiana and the North Carolina putsch might be seen as launching what Michael Perman dubbed "the struggle for mastery." That is, Southern Democrats now would no longer brook any political opposition at all. By 1907 every Southern state had found a variety of reinforcing legal means to prevent African-Americans from voting, pushing black voter turnout effectively down to zero. That same process also sharply depressed white voter turnout.[17]

The New Populism

By forging new one-party regimes the Southern disenfranchisers created state-level hybrids of democratic competition and authoritarianism. As Robert Mickey has stressed these state-level regimes might be considered authoritarian enclaves. The new, post-disenfranchisement polities featured political competition, yes, but within a dominant party.[18]

As in other authoritarian regimes political ambition and careerism among aspiring politicians existed – and had to be managed. One critical institution for regulating the progressive ambition of professional politicians was the all-white Democratic primary. The top two candidates then proceeded to a runoff.[19]

In turn, this system for regulating political ambition had an important second-order effect: it encouraged demagoguery. As Morgan Kousser stressed, confining competition within a party in which there were few substantive policy differences placed a premium on demagogic skills. "In a political system without parties...sensationalism was usually the shortest route to victory...politicians were practically forced to blare recklessly in an effort to become known to the...public."[20]

Thus the region's most talented politicians – any men who might aspire to the presidency – were likely to have three salient traits. First was a baseline indifference to basic democratic

norms (or worse a taste for --or appreciation of – repression.) Second was a high level of

demagogic talent. Third, they would set their sights on the White House during times of

enormous social stress, and thus formulate ways to construct and appeal to widely shared

grievances – appeals that defined a suffering people and offered big promises of relief. That

is, they were likely to be populists in our contemporary sense.[21]

Turn now to very brief descriptions of the two great populist politicians of the 20th century,

Louisiana's Huey Long and Alabama's George Wallace. They exemplify the elective affinity

between "small-p" populism and the region's quasi-authoritarian politics.

Huey Long. During his time as governor of Louisiana – and then as de facto governor from

his seat in the United States Senate – Huey Long created something like a welfare state in his

state. Long busied himself in particular with health care, highway construction, and public

education. After surviving an attempt to impeach, try, and remove him from office, Long also

created a police state, complete with a state board of censors, a new bureau of criminal

investigation, court-packing, and direct control of election administration. It was a textbook

case of democratic backsliding. As Senator, Long turned to creating a national social

movement, Share Our Wealth, attacked the Roosevelt Administration as woefully timid in

addressing the Depression, and built a national following through regular radio addresses.

His death from gunshot wounds after a firefight the night of September 8, 1935 in the halls of

the Louisiana state capitol cut short a likely run at the presidency.[22]

George Wallace. Reading the 1968 platform of the American Independent Party, the third

party which nominated George Wallace, one finds clear concern for the creation of economic

security. It clearly seeks to construct a farmer-labor coalition. One also finds the classic

populist trope: utterly feckless elites, tolerant of mass disorder, have betrayed ordinary

authentic Americans. The platform also effectively called for forcible removal of African-

Americans from cities to special zones where they would be provided with job training. In a still startling finding, the Harris Poll found, in September, 1968, that *86%* of Americans seemed to believe that Wallace "[h]as the courage to say what he really thinks."

    Meanwhile, in his home state, Wallace had set up a state Sovereignty Commission dedicated to collecting intelligence about ordinary citizens, and the legislature had approved a crash modernization of the state police – whose taste for violence shocked America when newsreel footage captured the police assault on the Selma to Montgomery March at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, March 6, 1965. Like Long before him Wallace and his co-partisans proved adept at creating and presiding over an authoritarian enclave.[23]

Concluding Thoughts

    To sum up, the two most talented demagogues of the 20th century typify the new populism forged in the South in the aftermath of the great Populist scare of the 1890s. Their careers illustrate how the aftermath of – and fierce reaction to – Populism created sub-national authoritarianism. That regional system had devices for regulating political ambition, the operation of which helped to create a distinctive kind of politician. In two fascinating but also alarming cases – Huey Long and George Wallace -- this new kind of politician was able to achieve enough national prominence as to raise the prospect of a populist in the Oval Office.

    More broadly, I have clarified why, in using the label "populist" in an American context, we summon what appear to be conflicting histories: the Populist moment, on the one hand, and the politics made by talented Southern demagogues, on the other. Those histories are connected, it turns out. Grasping the larger developmental arc can give us a stronger sense of whether the past is prologue or, alternatively, whether we are witnessing something new in American political development.

ENDNOTES

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[10] Democratic Party Platforms: "1896 Democratic Party Platform," July 7, 1896. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project.* http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29586.

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