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The American Populist and Anti-Populist Legacy

Charles Postel

A coalition of American farmer, labor, and middle-class reform organizations forged a new political party in 1891. They called it the People's Party, otherwise known as the Populist Party. Their effort proved to be the most successful third party movement in the United States since prior to the Civil War. Although the Populists had lost their organized strength by the end of the 1890s, their ideological and political legacy cast a long shadow across the twentieth century. The brief Populist moment brought major innovations in American politics and political thinking, and across the ensuing decades reformers inside and outside of the Democratic and Republican Parties absorbed much of the Populist program and outlook. Accordingly, Populism has been a significant current in the history of American political thought.

The 1890s Populists drew from multiple reform impulses, from women's suffragists to urban supporters of Henry George's Single Tax. But at its core it represented interest-based and class-based farmer-labor politics. In comparative transatlantic terms, the Populist vision of a "cooperative commonwealth," to be realized by way of majoritarian electoral democracy, shared ideological terrain with other labor and evolutionary socialist movements. By the turn of the century, as the People's Party collapsed, ex-Populists forged a key constituency of the Socialist Party. Other ex-Populists helped to consolidate factions that pursued labor, farmer, and other reform agendas within both the Democratic and Republican Parties. These farmer-labor and social-democratic traditions played a critical role in early twentieth-century state building and in the development of the New Deal, and they continued to be felt in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and beyond.

Populist ideology, however, was always just one among the multiple currents of American political thought. It contested the ideological terrain along with various types of radicalism, liberalism, and nationalism. Most importantly, it confronted a militant strain of conservatism. Historians often place the birth of modern conservatism in the context of the resistance to the New Deal or the strains of the Cold War and civil rights,[1] but it has an earlier ancestry and a striking resemblance to the reactionary response of wealth and power to the late nineteenth-century Populist challenge. Examining this anti-Populist aspect of the conservative legacy provides insights into later conservative mobilizations, including episodes when conservatives have used the techniques of mass agitation and mobilization developed by Populists and similar movements for right-wing causes. As Geoff Eley explains, prior to 1914 German radical

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nationalism confronted social democracy on "its own ground."[2] Similarly, American conservatives seized Populist weapons to defeat Populism. But here it must be stressed that the fact that Populism and conservatism interacted does not suggest a blurring of distinctions. The American conservative movement has always been on a trajectory that is quite distinct from the Populist movement of the 1890s, or the various political currents that flowed from that movement.

Conservative movements, of course, take multiple forms covering a wide swath of ideological ground. It just so happens that conservative movements often identify themselves as such, and proudly so, which makes for a good starting point for answering the question of what is and what is not a conservative movement. Yet there are significant distinctions within self-identified conservative political thought. Edmund Burke, for example, had a more reserved sensibility, or at least language, than the root-and-branch militancy of Joseph McCarthy; the present-day conservatives of German Christian Democracy, obviously, speak in a different style than American Tea Party conservatives. Yet, as Corey Robin warns, it would be a mistake to overstate such distinctions and fail to recognize a common conservative bottom line in the defense of economic, gender, and racial hierarchies.[3] In the American historical context, conservative movements arose against the menace of slave abolition, labor radicalism, women's rights, and African-American civil rights. Conservative movements also emerged in response to populism. Conservative anti-populism has been called into existence by populist movements or developments that appear to offer the potential for such movements.

What then is a populist movement? This is a more perplexing question. Political movements often avoid self-identification as populist, partly because of the term's pejorative connotations. Yet, it is applied promiscuously by journalists and a section of scholarly analysts who have the tag at the ready for political phenomena that either escape easy labels or whose easy labels somehow have less cachet than populism seems to have. As a result, populism serves as a catchall. The term is used to suggest characteristics such as nationalistic, corporatist, and perhaps irrational and authoritarian power as in various movements and regimes in Latin America. In European contexts it often implies demagogic, intolerant, and self-destructive politics. And in the United States, populism serves as short hand for hostility to elite and centralized power, whether that power rests in the state, the economy, or the culture. The meaning of the term populism often implies some mix of all of these. It is a highly contingent, unstable, malleable, and multifaceted notion, with different elements gaining more or less salience from one region and one time frame to the next.

The first usage of the term *populist* was as a quirky nickname for the American People's Party, whose supporters were commonly known as either Populists, or simply Pops.[4] Soon thereafter the name was applied to the *narodnik* movement in Tsarist Russia. What connected these two contemporaneous yet profoundly different phenomena? As Margaret Canovan notes in her classification of populist types, the most important connection between the two was the quite accidental translation of the Russian word *narodnik* to the newly invented English word *populist*.[5] Indeed, because the concept of populism is so flexible and contingent, it has little value outside of specifically defined meanings in specific places and moments. The Populist movement of the 1890s in the United States represents one such place and moment.

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The People's Party represented a new type of political formation. Traditionally, American political parties drew their strength as mechanisms for capturing political office and distributing the spoils. The People's Party, by contrast, formed as a "Confederation of Industrial Organizations," and rested on the strength of farmer and labor associations. The most important of these were Farmers' Alliances and related farm organizations that had spread their networks from coast to coast.[6] Industrial unions among coal miners and railroad employees also played a major role, and in several Midwestern and Rocky Mountain states the People's Party was principally a labor movement.[7] The Populist confederation also enrolled tax and currency reformers, women's rights advocates, and a number of other mainly urban and middle class constituencies. The politics of interest lay at the core of this coalition. Charles Macune, the ideological architect of the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union, the most powerful of the Populist groups, explicitly rejected the physiocratic notion that farmers' claims derived from some primordial relationship to the land. Rather, he argued, agriculture was a modern business interest, and like every other such interest must organize on business principles.[8] Although Macune himself did not join the People's Party, the majority of his followers did, and they went into politics with other "industrial interests" in the pursuit of interest-based goals. In the process, they facilitated major innovations in American politics.

The Populists placed on the national political agenda redistributive politics by way of an aggressive expansion of federal power and bureaucracy. The Omaha Platform of 1892 was the Populists' most celebrated statement of principles, and reflected the aspirations of its constituencies for reordering and rationalizing the national political economy.[9] The Populists sought to improve the market leverage of agriculture, to strengthen the negotiating position of labor, and to address a growing crisis of economic inequality. Towards these objectives they articulated four major Populist demands: 1) federal farm subsidies by way of the so-called Subtreasury System, a nationalized system of credit and marketing; 2) a flexible national currency to meet the needs of agricultural markets, provide relief for indebted farmers, and economic stimulus; 3) public ownership of railroads, telecommunications, banking, and other "natural monopolies"; and 4) a progressive income tax to redistribute wealth and to finance public education, universities, research, infrastructure, and the expanded capacities of state regulation. Never before had an American political movement so forcefully pushed such state-centered reforms into national politics. In the ensuing decades, these Populist demands served as building blocks of the modern regulatory state.

The other major innovation had to do with how the Populists sought to realize their goals. They sought a means to ensure a democratic or majoritarian control over the energized and expanded national state power that they sought to build. In place of the personalistic politics of patronage and influence peddling, the Populists imagined an impersonal and equitable politics. The Populist demands for the direct election of US senators, an expansion of the civil service, the Australian (secret) ballot, and a more rationalized electoral process provided much of the impetus for the political reforms of the Progressive Era. Moreover, in place of the old partisan tactics based on emotional and sectional appeals, fireworks, torchlight parades, and free liquor, the Populists

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envisioned a new politics based on mass adult education. This was a corollary to their belief in politics as an extension of business-like interests. If through mass education farmers, miners, and other "industrial interests" better understood the workings of political economy, they could make that political economy work better for themselves. Hence the Populist watchword: "Knowledge is Power."[10] The Populist movement built a national network for the publication and circulation of inexpensive educational materials, and had a lecture circuit that resembled the educational Chautauqua system more than a traditional political campaign.[11]

Both in terms of goals and means, the Populists of the 1890s represented what in the European context might have resembled a type of reformist and evolutionary social democracy. They envisaged a rationalized mixed economy, with a larger role played by both state-owned and cooperative industries than was the case in the American corporate model. They sought to undermine the position of grain dealers, merchants, and other middlemen, not through revolutionary expropriation, but through the construction of large-scale, centralized, and bureaucratic cooperative enterprises. They sought a more activist state in the spheres of education, infrastructure, regulation, and economic development, which was to be accomplished by combining mass education with the majoritarian democracy of the ballot box.

All of this might sound tame enough. However, it would be difficult to overstate the trauma that Populism spread among the upper class and a section of the middle classes. In 1896, Theodore Roosevelt, serving at the time as the commissioner of the New York Police Department, reportedly suggested that the best solution to the Populist threat was to line the Populists "against a wall to be shot." He would later deny the report about firing squads, but his language remained no less violent. That same year, William Jennings Bryan, a reform Democrat ran for President with Populist support. Roosevelt viewed the Populist-Democrats as "a gathering of social unrest," "anarchy," "socialism," and those "who want to strike down the well-to-do." As such, they represented an existential threat, "fundamentally an attack on civilization; an appeal to the torch."[12]

Roosevelt was hardly alone in his apocalyptic assessment of the Populist threat. Part of the problem was class. The Populist mobilization threatened the profits and power of the railroad and bank corporations, as well as a large number of merchants and brokers. More broadly, it threatened the rigid social ordering of manual and intellectual labor. The independent political and educational mobilization of so many people with callused hands and sunburned necks proved a frightening development to many academics, journalists, and other mainly urban dwellers that enjoyed the status and privileges of their desk-bound pursuits. A wave of labor action culminating in the spring and summer of 1894 compounded upper and middle class fears: the unemployed marched to Washington; the bituminous coal miners went on strike; and the railroad workers' boycott of Pullman cars paralyzed much of the country's railroads. Significantly, prominent supporters of the People's Party—Jacob Coxey, John McBride, and Eugene Debs—led all three of these frightening class developments.[13]

Race also played a part. Post-Civil Rights era historians, following the lead of C. Vann Woodward, have overstated the extent to which Populism represented a bi-racial challenge to the white power structure in the South.[14] White Populists tended to be no less committed to white supremacy than were white Democrats (and many

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white Republicans).[15] Yet, the political competition between white Democrats and white Populists pried open possibilities for African-American political action in Texas, Alabama, Georgia, and elsewhere. Most strikingly, in North Carolina white Populists and mainly black Republicans formed a fusion government that built schools and took other measures sought by the African-American community and that were perceived as a threat to white power.[16]

Then there was the "woman question," as it was called. The Farmers' Alliances and other Populist organizations enrolled hundreds of thousands of women members in what was then the largest mobilization of women in American history. Populist women sought educational and employment opportunities, and many demanded property rights, the right to divorce, and the right to vote.[17] A highly effective cadre of women lecturers and editors drove much of the Populist educational machinery. This included Mary Elizabeth Lease, the orator who reportedly told Kansas farmers to "raise less corn and more hell." Conservative critics ridiculed Lease as unfeminine, awkward, and out of place, reflecting broader conservative fears of Populist women. *Harpers' Weekly* reported that women were "a disturbing and uncertain element" in the Populist West.[18]

To the extent that Populism challenged the existing hierarchies, it loomed as a grisly specter in the conservative imagination. Looking at the Populists in the light of the transatlantic phantoms of anarchism and communism, political, corporate, and academic elites saw at work the American version of blood-soaked Communards and fanatical agrarians wielding sharpened pitchforks. Such judgments had little or nothing to do with living and breathing Populists. They nonetheless provided a good measure of the prejudices and narrow-mindedness that guided the thinking of sections of the wealthy and intellectual classes. Such prejudices had deep roots, and these and related critiques of Populism have been recurrent themes in American intellectual life.

In fact, one of Populism's most significant intellectual legacies has little to do with the political experience of the 1890s. Rather, it has to do with the efforts of mid-twentieth-century American intellectuals to reevaluate the Populists in light of the experience of Nazism in Europe and right-wing intolerance in Cold War America. Their working hypothesis was that the Populism of the 1890s, as an unreasoned mass movement, represented an American version of intolerant mass politics or proto-fascism. This search for the roots of American fascism was an interdisciplinary project among social scientists, with the Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter being its most effective practitioner. Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* won the 1955 Pulitzer Prize and enjoyed (and continues to enjoy) wide influence.[19] Hofstadter conducted little research on the Populist movement itself, and as such his analysis of Populism was largely intuitive. Some of his insights were quite discerning, especially regarding the commercial character of farming in the United States, and the business nature, or what Hofstadter called the "hard-headed" side, of farmer motivations. But he could be wide of the mark. The worst of it was when Hofstadter ranged into psychological analysis. Here he diagnosed Populist delusion, paranoia, and fanaticism. For Hofstadter, this "soft-headed" Populism correlated to a feminized irrationality, in contrast to a manly realism. In short, just as they had set out to demonstrate, Hofstadter and his colleagues discovered that the farmer-labor Populism of the 1890s was the American fountainhead of the politics of unreason, intolerance, and anti-Semitism.

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Two or three generations after the old Populism had left the political stage, Hofstadter explained, its tradition "turned sour," resulting in the "illiberal and ill-tempered" and "cranky-pseudo-conservatism" of 1950s McCarthyism.[20]

Hofstadter's claims about the "souring process" and Populist irrationality, intolerance, and anti-Semitism drew a forceful rebuttal. C. Vann Woodward, Walter Nugent, Norman Pollack, and other historians who had actually spent time in the archives studying the Populist record, demonstrated that such claims were overwrought, hyperbolic, and ahistorical.[21] The political scientist Michael Rogin's examination of voting patterns revealed the absence of demographic or political connections between the Populists of the 1890s and the conservative supporters of Joseph McCarthy more than half a century later.[22] By the end of the 1960s, the so-called Hofstadter thesis was in tatters. Later generations of scholars have diligently covered the same terrain from a wide variety of perspectives and have come up with similar conclusions about the weaknesses in Hofstadter's claims. Yet, mainly outside of the historical profession, the Hofstadter thesis has maintained its influence on political analysis. *The Age of Reform* has been described as "the most influential book ever published on the history of twentieth-century America."[23] To this day, it informs the views of a number of intellectuals who admire its elegant style and embrace an argument that reinforces their own notions about the supposed deficiencies in the mentality of rural and working people.

It must be stressed here that the weaknesses in the Hofstadter thesis have to do with exaggerations. Populism was a complex and sprawling social movement that mobilized millions of people. As in any such movement of that scope, it contained strands of unreasoned, conspiratorial, authoritarian, and intolerant political thought.[24] That being said, what made Populism significant as an historical moment of innovation and creativity was precisely its clear-eyed interest-based politics, the high level of its educational campaign, and its inclusive and tolerant appeal. This reality explains why so many scholars have invested so much intellectual energy in demonstrating the error in Hofstadter's claims, because such claims not only create a false portrait of the farmer-labor Populists, they also make a hash of understanding the historical origins of American politics of unreason and intolerance.

The nineteenth century was marked by the relentless brutality of white supremacy. Scholars have debated the extent to which white Populists were invested in white power. But the one point where they agree is that the Democratic Party was the pre-eminent party of white supremacy, and it was the Democratic Party that quite appropriately made that claim more than a half-century before the People's Party came into existence. As for anti-Asian bigotry, during the depression of the 1870s, the Workingmen's Party in California made Chinese immigrants the scapegoats for high unemployment, and mobilized to demand Chinese exclusion laws.[25] Like many other Americans, Populists tended to be in favor of such laws. But in a striking contrast with the 1870s, during the depression of the 1890s most Populists refrained from scapegoating any racial or ethnic group and instead placed demands on the federal government for jobs and economic stimulus.[26] Similarly, the nineteenth century was littered with political movements driven by fears of Papist, Masonic, and other conspiratorial plots, and the Republican Party made exploiting such fears high political

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art and mobilized generations of voters on the basis of anti-Catholic appeals. Again, what stands out about the People's Party in this history was the relative absence of this type of political exploitation of religious prejudice.

But what of the validity of Hofstadter's claim regarding Populist anti-Semitism? In widely circulated Populist writings, "Shylock" stood in for "banker" in what were anti-Semitic literary metaphors about the role of Jews in the economy. Such literary expressions, however, as Hofstadter himself pointed out, were "a mode of expression," and were not aimed at actual Jews. This distinction is significant because, contrary to Hofstadter's claim, Jewish merchants and storekeepers were often very much a presence in the farm towns of Populist country.[27] Although Populist farmers tended to view the merchant and storekeeper as a competing business interest, and although a similar competition in Germany, for example, led some German farm reformers to stigmatize "brokers and Jews" as the "enemy,"[28] it is striking that such stigmatization, with the rarest exceptions, was not a feature of the Populist agitation. Indeed, the People's Party claimed to recognize no distinctions based on religion or creed. Part of this can be explained by the influence of Populist activists—from Clarence Darrow to Charlotte Perkins Gilman—who were attracted to the cosmopolitan and bohemian subcultures of Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, and other mainly western cities. In San Francisco, a coalition involving such activists successfully made the Jewish mining engineer Adolph Sutro the Populist mayor of the city.[29] In Omaha, Nebraska, Edward Rosewater, leading Republican, founder of the *Omaha Bee*, and the most prominent Jewish person in the state, supported the Populist candidate for governor because the Republican candidate had the backing of the anti-Catholic bigots of the American Protective Association.[30]

In remote rural places, too, Populists tended to both preach and practice religious tolerance. In the dusty cotton districts of central Texas, Samuel Ealy Johnson, the grandfather of Lyndon Baines Johnson, was a reluctant farmer and a bona fide People's Party politician who taught his family about human brotherhood and the importance of including Jews within that brotherhood. The lessons were not lost on his grandson. As a freshman congressman in 1938 and 1939, Johnson was one of the few people in Washington to use his political leverage to help Jewish refugees from Germany and Poland circumvent America's restrictive immigration laws.[31]

In terms of religious open-mindedness, the Johnsons of Texas represented a significant strand of the Populist legacy. But, there were exceptions to this pattern, such as Thomas Watson of Georgia. During his years as a Populist politician, Watson sounded the same tolerant themes as most Populists. But with the demise of the People's Party, Watson emerged as a strident Negrophobe and anti-Semite.[32] To weigh the significance of Watson's evolution, it needs to be kept in mind that during the Populist years a virulent and committed anti-Semitism was brewing among the urban elites groomed in the most exclusive universities, belonging to the most fashionable clubs, and residing in the finest urban districts. It was this environment that produced the career of Madison Grant, America's pioneer of virulent anti-Semitic advocacy, and the architect of the anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant Immigration Acts (the same ones that Lyndon Johnson defied). An American counterpart to prewar German radical nationalism, Grant authored *The Passing of the Great Race,* a 1916 treatise on the struggle for survival of the "Nordic race" against the Jewish and other "lower

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races"—a work that was praised by Adolf Hitler and embraced by a section of American academic, political, and business elites. True, the former Populist Watson would later emerge as a bigot. But the career of Madison Grant—graduate of Yale and Columbia Law, friend of Theodore Roosevelt, and life-long resident of New York City—poses serious questions of proportionality regarding Hofstadter's claim about the rural Populist roots of American anti-Semitism and intolerance.[33]

It also must be asked: how typical was Tom Watson's post-Populist evolution? After the demise of the People's Party a significant number of former Populists followed Eugene Debs into the Socialist Party. This Populist migration made Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas, and other rural states strongholds of the socialist movement.[34] As a result, American socialism represented an extraordinary political marriage of rural former Populists, mainly with Anglo and Protestant cultural backgrounds, and the socialist language federations of mainly Eastern and Southern European immigrants, including Jewish immigrants. This marriage represents a Populist legacy that cannot be easily explained within Hofstadter's framework.

Meanwhile, the majority of former Populists migrated to the reform wings of the Democratic and Republican Parties. In doing so they made up key constituencies of the progressive coalitions—often prodded or supported by socialists—that facilitated Progressive Era developments in state building, from the graduated income tax, to the regulation of banking and commerce, to the direct election of senators. As the political scientist Elizabeth Sanders has demonstrated, the successes of Progressive Era reforms were attributable to their deep roots in the Populist farmer-labor movements of the previous decades.[35] This legacy, in terms of both political demographics and ideological bent, also played a significant role in the forging of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Again in the case of Lyndon Johnson, he was viewed by members of FDR's administration as "the best New Dealer from Texas."[36] Like his Populist ancestors, he believed in extending the scope of the federal bureaucracy as a means of economic and social justice. In this regard, Johnson's "Great Society" programs of the 1960s might be understood as having ideological roots in the original Populism of Johnson's grandfather.

Although most white Populists of the 1890s believed in white nationalism, they expressed a wide array of views when it came to whether or not African Americans should be granted civil and political rights. This left a mixed and often contradictory legacy. Of course, it was Lyndon Johnson who signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of the following year. Most other southern Democrats with Populist roots were less sympathetic to black rights. Yet, with some exceptions, it tended to be the Populists' old political enemies, the Democrats, who formed the front ranks of the racial demagogues. Here the example of Alabama's Democratic governor George Wallace carries some telling ironies. Wallace is often mentioned as an example of "southern Populism," although unlike his political foe Lyndon Johnson and other southern politicians he had no discernable connections to historical Populism. Nonetheless, in his early career, Wallace aligned with the reform wing of the Democratic Party in Alabama, that is the wing that embraced the Populist lessons that the federal government had a role to play in building roads, schools, and colleges, and building dams for rural electrification. A more conservative college friend derided Wallace as "a

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genuine Franklin Roosevelt socialist."[37] In his 1968 presidential campaign, Wallace touted his role in expanding government outlays for the disabled and the elderly, and for raising salaries and pensions in the public sector.[38] Perhaps, in an indirect way Wallace, too, might be regarded as part of a Populist legacy that had been diluted and dispersed across the twentieth century. At the same time, it would be difficult to detect what was distinctly "southern Populist" rather than "southern Democratic" about Wallace's racial politics. He started his political career as a self-styled "moderate" on race relations until, like so many southern Democrats that preceded him, he later discovered the political efficacy of venomous race baiting. In the 1960s, this led Wallace to forge a political alliance with the hard-right conservative wing of the Republican Party in a joint struggle against black civil rights. But the alliance proved unstable. To the extent that he accepted much of the New Deal and the social contract that it implied, Wallace was never able to make a confortable ideological home within the conservative movement of Robert Welch, Barry Goldwater, and William Buckley, Jr.[39]

The roots of modern conservatism can be traced back to the Populist epoch, but not in the way that Hofstadter and his colleagues suggested. Hofstadter employed the methods of mass psychology to analyze what he perceived as the Populist fevers surrounding currency reform and anti-monopoly. But such an analysis misses just how fevered the conservative opponents of Populism were in *their* ideological commitments. In the late nineteenth century, conservative thought hardened and fastened on three interrelated propositions about the political economy: so-called laissez-faire, the freedom of contract, and hard money. For academic and corporate elites, this holy trinity of anti-populist ideas stirred deep passions. In the face of farmer-labor demands for regulation of railroad rates, graduated income taxes, and other adjustments in the political economy, conservative thinkers such as William Graham Sumner at Yale erected a doctrine that defined such adjustments as violations of natural and immutable economic laws.[40] They referred to their doctrine as laissez-faire, arguing that the private corporate economy must be free of governmental interference if it were to run along its natural and therefore God-given course. Reality, including massive interventions by the federal government on behalf of corporations—protective tariffs, railroad subsidies, bank charters, court action, and so forth—rarely intruded on this ideological fantasy.[41] The associated doctrine of the so-called freedom of contract was the conservative response to farmer-labor demands for legislation to establish arbitration boards, shorter workdays, and restrictions on child labor. Again, conservatives erected freedom of contract as a brittle dogma, without regard to either America's long history of regulatory legislation or the realities of employer–employee relations.

The farmer-labor demands for currency reform brought forth the most fevered conservative response of all. During the post-Civil War decades, a deflationary cycle gripped the American economy, squeezing farmers and other debtors, stalling investment, and pushing industry into recurrent slumps. The Populists and other reformers argued that the channels of commerce required a more flexible currency, based on paper, silver, or a combination of the two, as a means to aid distressed farmers and stimulate the economy. Despite a tendency to employ conspiratorial language when discussing the role of Wall Street and the banking corporations, the Populists had a relatively sophisticated understanding of the currency and a relatively clear-headed

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interest-based approach to the problem. Relatively is the operative word here, as Populist soft-money arguments are best understood when compared to the conservative response.

Business, political, and academic conservatives were known as Gold Bugs because they were gold fetishists. They convinced themselves that this particular metal represented a moral, naturally ordered, and superior civilization. Professor of economics Edwin Seligman at Columbia wrote that silver coinage was a "suicidal mania," that would "plunge the country into disaster, the momentous evils of which can be only faintly imagined."[42] Harvard economist Francis Amasa Walker warned that paper money would weaken the power of fathers and husbands and result in "effeminacy." Hard money was a product of natural evolution, according to Walker, as "the better," that is gold, has "gradually crowded the worse out of existence."[43] Populist silver was nothing short of a diabolic conspiracy to reduce the "highest civilization" to the level of "pagan Asiatics."[44] This is how the better people talked, and how learned professors wrote. These were also highly charged ideological commitments that fed the polarized politics of the Gilded Age.

The polarization came to a head in the presidential elections of 1896. On the Democratic side stood William Jennings Bryan, a young congressman from Nebraska. Although Bryan himself was never a Populist, he had made alliances with Populists, and the People's Party endorsed his candidacy because he championed soft money and other reforms. On the Republican side stood William McKinley. As the governor of Ohio, a swing state, McKinley knew how to split the difference on the political issues. He was a strong supporter of business and the tariff, and also said favorable things about labor arbitration and union rights. He was for hard money, and also sympathized with soft money, too. But when it came to running for president, he adopted conservative Gold Bug positions, with the conservative political and corporate elites investing their cash and their hopes in the McKinley campaign. The Republican ticket represented Wall Street's gold standard against Populist soft money, and corporate regressive tariffs against Populist graduated income taxes. But much more was at stake than monetary and fiscal policy. For Mark Hanna, a coal and steel industrialist and McKinley's close friend and campaign manager, the danger resided in the "communistic spirit" that sustained Bryan's campaign. For the journalist William Allen White, Bryan himself was "an incarnation of demagogy, the apotheosis of riot, destruction, and carnage."[45] By such measures, the anti-Bryan election campaign might be understood as the first conservative anti-populist political mobilization at the national level.

The McKinley campaign made special efforts to appeal to the American worker. Gold Bugs argued that defending the gold standard was not about the profits of bankers and financiers, but defending honest wages for honest work. The conservative political economy not only conformed to supposedly natural law, but would also provide a "full dinner pail" for those who labored in workshop and mine. Such marked appeals to producers and laborers might be explained by the competition, given that Bryan and the Democrats had their own such appeals. But there is a simpler and more direct explanation: virtually all American political campaigns have required such things.

The necessity of capturing a majority of votes in a winner-take-all election has driven political campaigning since the advent of universal male suffrage. Such a

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majority has provided the essential legitimacy of political power. Accordingly, as Ronald Formisano argues, notions of people's sovereignty and claims to express the will of the people have been intimately related to insurgent popular movements across the political spectrum from right to left.[46] Indeed, such claims have not been restricted to outside challengers, but have been a universal of American politics. At least since the days of Andrew Jackson, political conflicts—at least those that have made it into the electoral arena—have been marked by appeals to the common voter: variously known as the plain people, the producers, the laboring man, the forgotten man, the silent majority, the middle class, or some variation of the same. In fact, an organic link with this imagined people has been a requirement of American politics. In the nineteenth century, to prove their popular bona fides, political contenders would acquire a taste for hard cider and make claims about their humble log cabin origins. In more recent years, candidates have posed for the cameras as they chop brush on a ranch, drive a pickup truck, play basketball, or shoot various animals. Moreover, in a corollary to this appeal to the people, political campaigns—of whatever stripe—have usually involved mobilizing voters to unseat real or imagined oppressive, illegitimate, or otherwise baneful centers of power: the monster bank, the slave power, the monopolists, the economic royalists, the federal bureaucrats, or, as in the 1896 elections, the gold bondholders and the silver mining interest.

These deeply rooted features of American political practice are at the heart of Michael Kazin's argument about the historic continuity of a populist language of persuasion.[47] However, it is important to keep in mind that this language was by no means an innovation of the People's Party of the 1890s. To the contrary, this language preceded the Populists by several generations. Moreover, unlike many campaigns that preceded it, Populism tended to emphasize an interest-based "business politics," and downplay emotional appeals and simplistic slogans. What was perhaps most innovative about Populist political practice was the insistence that politics should be rooted in mass education. In a typical People's Party rally, farmers would stand out in the hot sun listening to a two-hour discourse on the minutiae of markets, credit, infrastructure, or some other problem of political economy. The Populists' political weapons of choice were cheaply published books and pamphlets on a wide range of economic, political, scientific, and historical topics. Much of the Populist educational campaign involved serious research and well-reasoned argument although, as already mentioned, some of this literature bent in the direction of conspiracy (a fact that needs to be weighed next to the more extravagant demagogy of the conservatives).[48]

This Populist emphasis on mass education led to one of the great ironies of the 1896 election campaign, as the conservatives seized on what was a Populist innovation for their own ends. With corporate funding and the support of the urban press, Mark Hanna and the conservatives launched their own campaign of mass education in support of their anti-Populist platform of hard money and high tariffs. They produced a flood of inexpensive pamphlets and educational literature that swamped the network of reform publications supporting Bryan.[49] Despite the inequity in resources, the political contest became an educational contest, as 1896 became "a campaign of study and analysis," and "a search for economic and political truth."[50] The conservatives won the contest, at least in the vote-rich Northeast and Midwest. But it proved an unstable victory.

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With McKinley's assassination in September of 1901, the presidency fell into the hands of Teddy Roosevelt, who by this time was moving towards what was becoming the reform wing of the Republican Party. Conservative anti-populism frayed under the pressures of the new twentieth-century political realities and the financial panic of 1907. The election of 1912 repudiated conservative doctrine, as three-quarters of the voters cast their ballots for the progressive candidates, either Woodrow Wilson or Roosevelt, or for the socialist, Debs. From time to time the old dogmas would reassert themselves in their old, militant form. During the Great Depression, the corporate opposition to the New Deal, spearheaded by family members of the DuPont chemical empire and the Liberty League, tried and mainly failed to build a political force promising a return to conservative principles. During the early years of the Cold War, the modern conservative movement had more political success in this endeavor, as the likes of Robert Taft, Joseph McCarthy, and Barry Goldwater held sway over a right-wing faction of the Republican Party, and as Robert Welch and the John Birch Society mobilized a grass-roots social movement that sustained this faction.[51]

In recent years we have seen a new hardening of conservative thinking, and a resurrection of the holy trinity of laissez-faire, freedom of contract, and hard money. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* (2010) decision overturned limits on corporate political spending, and endorsed notions of corporate laissez-faire unrealized since the Gilded Age. The conservative argument for the 2011 Wisconsin law limiting public sector union rights was rooted in the old freedom of contract dogma. The parallels between early twenty-first century conservative commitments and those that preceded the reforms of the Progressive Era are hardly accidental. Rather they reflect a distinct historical consciousness. As suggested by its name, the conservative Tea Party movement is all about history lessons, and one of its central lessons is that America fell from grace with the end of the Gilded Age. In 2010, *Time* magazine listed Glenn Beck, the conservative television and radio personality who helped launch the Tea Party movement, as one of the hundred most influential people in the world. Former Alaska governor Sarah Palin explained why:

> [Beck] has become America's professor of common sense. . . . Consider his desire to teach Americans about the history of the progressive movement: he's doing to *progressive* what Ronald Reagan did to *liberal*—explaining that it's a damaged brand.[52]

In Beck's telling, the Progressive movement introduced into American life pernicious and unconstitutional notions of social justice. The Federal Reserve Act regulating banking and providing for a more flexible currency, the progressive income tax, the direct election of senators, and the industrial regulations of the early twentieth century—all represent what Beck calls the "cancer" that has been gnawing at American freedom since the advent of the Progressive Era. Tea Party politicians, from Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, to the former leader of the Tea Party Caucus in Congress, Michele Bachman, have attested to this history.[53] Whether in their critique of the campaign finance laws or the Federal Reserve, the conservative movement demands the repeal of the Progressive Era, and in so doing it has revived the most dogmatic of the Gilded Age laissez-faire arguments.

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Perhaps one of the most dogmatic of the conservative arguments pertains to the gold standard. A return to a fixed gold-backed currency has emerged in recent years as the alpha and omega of conservative economic thought. Tea Party conservatives in Congress have been pushing to repeal the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 and restore a precious metal currency. Milton Friedman, the leading light of the monetarist school of conservative economics, dismissed gold advocates as "monetary monomaniacs."[54] Modern economies, according to Friedman and his fellow monetarists, had moved away from the inflexible strictures of gold for a reason. Significantly, the Tea Party conservatives of recent years have repudiated Friedman's monetarism that sustained free-market conservatives during the last decades of the twentieth century. Instead, they have favored a return to the specie theories of the late nineteenth century. Glenn Beck has sold gold coins on his broadcasts, while explaining that gold is the currency of natural law and the only salvation for the American economy. In the 2012 Republican primaries, all nine presidential candidates pledged to rein in the Federal Reserve in favor of hard money, and six candidates pledged to return to the gold standard. As a contributor to *Forbes* magazine breathlessly reported, the Tea Party has moved the gold standard "from the realm of mavericks and social dystopians to mainstream conservative, and even Republican presidential candidate, policy. The gold standard's momentum is building fast."[55]

This poses the question, why in the second decade of the twenty-first century has the United States witnessed the rise of a movement dedicated to a specifically late nineteenth-century conservative ideology? In framing the question it needs to be kept in mind that this variation of conservatism is partly the enduring legacy of the Cold War era hard right. Robert Welch's John Birch Society and similar conservative groups fell below the political radar after the prominent part they played in the Republican conservative resurgence of the early 1960s. But they continued to build up their ideological networks. Within this effort, the author Cleon Skousen played a key role. More than anyone else the notion that America lost its freedom with the advent of the Progressive Era is associated with Skousen's name. It might be noted here that both Welch and Skousen portrayed themselves as men of high learning and social status. Welch was a corporate executive who earned a fortune in the candy business, while Skousen was a self-styled FBI man and law enforcement expert, Mormon theologian, and constitutional scholar. Their vision of restoring America to its constitutional bedrock included the notion that men of knowledge and virtue, such as themselves, should hold the political reins. As the John Birch Society slogan puts it, "America is a republic, not a democracy."[56]

But if the Cold War hard right has served as the transmission belt of Gilded Age conservative orthodoxy, its Tea Party-fueled resurgence must be understood in the context of a fevered response to what has been perceived as an existential political threat. As Barack Obama entered the White House, millions of Americans projected their hopes and fears onto his presidency. Since his early days in the Illinois legislature, Omaha has hewed the course as a moderate Democrat. Yet, progressives have fantasized that he would usher in a progressive revival in the spirit of Teddy or Franklin Roosevelt. And in the fevered conservative imagination, Obama represents the socialism of the radical wing of the Progressive tradition, and his administration represents the triple

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nightmare of regulation (banking, health care), redistributive taxes, and inflationary stimulus. It may be difficult to understand this perception, given the half-hearted, parsimonious, and corporate-friendly nature of Obama's political agenda. But the power of the conservatives' nightmare is real enough. Holding aloft the old anti-populist trinity of laissez-faire, freedom of contract, and hard money, a section of corporate conservatives have launched an implacable political crusade. Playing the role of modern-day Mark Hannas, the billionaires David and Charles Koch of Koch Industries, through Americans for Prosperity and other corporate lobbies, have poured their vast resources into political education and mobilization. Recognizing that the Obama campaign made use of the web to mobilize grass-roots support, the AFP and similar Tea Party groups conduct educational campaigns in the use of Twitter, Facebook, and other technologies to mobilize a mass response to the perceived Obama threat.[57] Part of the success of the Tea Party conservatives is their promise of a return to prosperity—that by restoring conservative orthodoxy, Americans will have the twenty-first century version of the "full dinner pail."

The uncanny historical parallels between the conservative resurgence of the 2010s and the conservative anti-populism of the 1890s can partly be explained by the historical mindedness of the Tea Party movement. It has set out by design to resuscitate a pre-Progressive Era conservative orthodoxy. But by a number of measures the analogy breaks down. There are no good parallels, for example, with the unprecedented fact that Obama is the African-American son of an African immigrant with a Muslim name. Accordingly, the conservative nightmare is also a racial nightmare, as the Obama administration represents new demographic realities and dangers. Here there are important comparisons to be drawn with right-wing movements in other parts of the globe. The American Tea Party, for example, shares much of the xenophobic, anti-Muslim, and racial commitments of European right-wing movements. But more directly than the Tea Party Republicans, parties such as Marine Le Pen's National Front in France and Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands have been defined by such commitments. At the same time, Le Pen advocates what she describes as a "populiste" vision of strong state-centered social policies, and Geert Wilders favors an eclectic mix of neoliberal and social-democratic measures. As Cas Mudde points out, much of the European radical right embraces the notion of the "social market economy" that has evolved out of the post-Second World War social contract.[58] Of course, shades of such politics can be found in the Tea Party movement as well. For example, during the debates over health care reform demonstrators showed up at Tea Party rallies with signs saying: "Keep Your Government Hands Off of My Medicare!" This slogan reflects the ambiguities produced by an ideological hostility to state provision and a political commitment to protect such provision for preferred constituencies.[59] Nonetheless, the hostility of Tea Party conservatives to the notion of a social contract reflects an ideological divide separating them from much of European right-wing populism.

Moreover, the American right faces a specific enemy that has not confronted their European counterparts in quite the same way. Whereas Le Pen and Wilders have struggled to keep the infidel at the gates, Perry and Bachman have sought liberation from the infidel in power. From the Tea Party perspective, the presidency of Barack Obama represents an illegitimate usurpation and tyranny. This explains why the

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American right wing, perhaps even more than it usually has over the last half century, has been speaking in the name of an aggrieved, dispossessed, and persecuted people. Hence the Tea Party movement has promised a liberation struggle to "Take Back Our Country!" In many ways, this is the historical language of political combat in the United States. But it also reflects a new context with the election of the nation's first African-American president.

In 1860, the white conservatives rose in rebellion against the election of the so-called "black Republican" Abraham Lincoln because they believed that the new president posed a danger to the institution of slavery and white power. In 2008, white conservatives mobilized in fear of the threat that the election of a black president posed to the racial order. In the conservative narrative, Obama's victory was only made possible by his demagogic manipulation of voters and with the aid of massive voter fraud. In the story told by the Fox News television network and the conservative websites, Obama took the White House because his community-organizing minions herded felons, undocumented immigrants, and other illegal voters to the polls. Here it should be noted that, much like the conservative-driven disfranchisement laws at the end of the nineteenth century, a wave of legislation aimed at restricting voting rights among minority, poor, and young voters has been one of the signature measures realized by the Tea Party conservatives at the state level since the 2010 elections.[60] Then as now, conservatives fear the excesses of democracy and the perceived manipulation of the "ignorant" vote. Indeed, this was the conservative verdict on Obama's successful reelection: Obama consolidated power by means of redistributive economic policies to reward African American, Mexican American, and other non-white, immigrant, and marginalized groups. All of this has the final aim, many Tea Party activists have convinced themselves, of "reparations" for slavery and colonialism, as Obama has sought to uproot the property and place of white Americans within the shifting terrain of the US and global political economy.[61]

This framing of the Obama presidency has been, of course, a conservative nightmare that has little connection to reality. But nightmares have been a distinct part of Tea Party anti-populism. The scary visage that they have found so frightening perhaps is best understood in an international context. Much as the Haitian slave revolt pressed on the brains of nineteenth-century American conservatives, the modern conservative movement has raised its own mainly dark-skinned bogeyman among international movements of the dispossessed. In this regard, the conservative hatred for the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez suggests another comparative vantage point for analyzing the recent conservative resurgence. The *Tea Party News Network* have warned that, "reminiscent of the Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez," Obama threatens to muzzle the media.[62] Like-minded conservatives have predicted the Obama presidency will result in having "Hugo Chavez in America."[63] Meanwhile, conservative pundit Charles Krauthammer observed that Obama represents a "populism so crude that it channels not Teddy Roosevelt so much as Hugo Chavez"—intimating that Obama more resembles the demagogic Latin American *caudillo* then an American reformer.[64] Chavez came to power in 1998 on a left-wing platform sustained by the ballots of Venezuela's Afro, Indian, and impoverished majority. In response, conservative Venezuelans launched a furious opposition, demonstrating in the streets, unleashing

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strike waves, and organizing coups d'état. The mass opposition was based among whiter and more prosperous Venezuelans, who feared the loss of their historic power and place within the political economy. Millionaires provided the funding and private television stations served as key tools of mobilization. The opposition was especially inflamed by Chavez's successful efforts to extend the franchise among mainly non-white marginalized voters. In a similar fashion as their Tea Party counterparts, the anti-Chavez opposition viewed the extension of the democratic franchise as an expression of popular tyranny.[65]

Anti-populist movements with similar profiles have been unleashed in several other Latin American countries against left-wing administrations, including against Evo Morales in Bolivia, and to a lesser extent Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Thailand also provides a useful comparison. At least since the 1970s, Thailand has had a history of progressive or left-wing political movements being confronted and even eclipsed by right-wing movements employing their opponents' methods of social mobilization.[66] In 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister, appealing to the country's politicized peasantry and other rural and poor voters with promises of populist reforms such as low-cost health care, better schools, and debt relief.[67] In response, a conservative, explicitly anti-populist movement took to the streets. A television personality and media mogul spurred the creation of the People's Alliance for Democracy, or Yellow Shirts, that drew into its ranks much of the monarchist, militarist, and bureaucratic elite, as well as the urban upper and middle classes. Despite its name, the People's Alliance for Democracy marched under the yellow color of the monarchy in support of Thailand's most hierarchical institutions. Restricting the role of the democratic ballot was one of its key demands. At their height, Yellow Shirt street demonstrations overwhelmed the pro-Thaksin Red Shirt protesters, paralyzed the country, and sustained a right-wing coup d'état. In the midst of the Yellow Shirt protests, Prajak Konkeerati, a Thai political scientist, observed: "This is a very weird situation where a reactionary movement is mobilizing people by using conservative ideology mixed with leftist language."[68]

Much the same could be said about the noisy Tea Party movement protests in 2009 and 2010, voicing rage against the prospects that the Obama administration might dare to provide economic stimulus to aid the unemployed, debt relief for struggling homeowners, and health insurance protections to mainly low-income workers. There may have been something weird about right-wing activists marching in the streets and shouting down their enemies in militant defense of conservative and anti-populist economic principles. But, weird does not mean outside of history. At least since the political polarization of the late 1890s, Populism and its conservative opposition have represented distinct trends in American political thought. And since that time, anti-populist mobilization has been a recurrent theme in the American political drama.

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