Kansas Populism

Clanton, O. Gene

Published by University Press of Kansas


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81133

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2768304
Throughout the 1890s, the Kansas Republican press constantly labeled the leaders of the Populist party as "anarchists," "communists," "misfits," "loafers," "cranks," and "demagogues." In its efforts to down the party, this opposition repeatedly invoked the rags-to-riches or self-made-man myth, at times even the opposing yet parallel myth of rural virtue. Invariably, Populist leaders were caricatured, verbally and pictorially, in a manner suggesting that they represented the missing link in the evolutionary chain. All the intellectual equipment of social Darwinism was brought to bear in the assault on the party. The usual caricature that emerged in the period—especially in Eastern papers—picted a weather-beaten old man with distorted features; a dilapidated hat perched atop a head that was ornamented with a long but mangy-looking beard; between a set of irregular teeth dangled a stalk of straw; and a bony frame, after a fashion, was covered with a tattered set of bib overalls, from which emerged inevitably a pair of oversized boots recognizable as "clodhoppers."

The facts of the case have been as obscure as the picture was distorted. In order to clarify the matter, biographical material was obtained on eighty-nine individuals who made up the major leadership of the party in Kansas. Included here were all elected administrative officials, congressmen, prominent leaders in the state legislature, party officials, prominent lecturers and party workers, and writers and editors of leading Populist papers. The composite picture that resulted from this analysis revealed that the Kansas Populist leader was forty-six years old in 1890; he was most likely born in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, or Iowa, and moved to Kansas in 1871; he was, more often than not,
a lawyer, but a number combined the occupation of farming or stock raising with that of teacher or editor. Only one in five was engaged strictly in agricultural pursuits, and many of those had been lawyers, or teachers, or merchants before becoming farmers.

It should be noted that forty-six was the median age for seventy-six out of eighty-nine for whom ages could be determined. The average age was just over forty-four (44.3) and forty-one was the age of greatest frequency, seven individuals having fallen in that category. Twenty-five of these Populist leaders (33.8 percent) were fifty or older, and eight (10.5 percent) were thirty or less. Actually, forty-one out of seventy-three (56.1 percent) were natives of Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, or Iowa. The states of Indiana, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin accounted for another fifteen (20.5 percent), and the remainder were divided among nine other states and Canada. Information as to when these individuals came to Kansas was obtained in seventy-two of eighty-nine cases. Twenty-eight (38.8 percent) came before 1870 and only fourteen (19.4 percent) came in 1880 or later. Occupational analysis, based on findings in seventy-nine of eighty-nine cases, revealed that thirty-one (39.2 percent) had been admitted to the practice of law; twenty-three (26.4 percent) were teachers by profession or had taught school at some point in their lives; and seventeen (21.5 percent) were engaged exclusively in farming.

This leadership was, in other words, a middle-class leadership—rural middle class, perhaps, but middle class nonetheless. More than half had graduated from one or more colleges, and counting those who had some college education, one arrives at the impressive discovery that almost two out of three had had some contact with the college environment. Actually, information revealing the educational background of this leadership group was available in sixty out of the eighty-nine cases. Thirty-one of these leaders (51.6 percent) had graduated from one or more colleges; another eight (13.3 percent) had attended college for varying periods of time; another seven (11.6 percent) had an academy or high school education, and fourteen (23.3 percent) were the recipients of only a common-school education. Even if the twenty-
seven for whom no information was found were all placed in the common-school category, the percentage of college graduates would remain unusually high for the nineteenth century—thirty-one of eighty-nine, or 34.8 percent. As might be expected, the college environment that these people came out of was primarily that of the Middle West; but Eastern colleges were well represented, and three of the group were graduates of Harvard, Stanford, and Oxford universities.3

The composite Kansas Populist leader had also been active in reform for some time before 1890. The information pertaining to previous party affiliation, available for fifty-four of the group, revealed that thirty-two (59.4 percent) of these Populist leaders were active in the third-party reform movement before 1890. The usual route traveled had carried them from the Republican party to the Greenback party, then to the Prohibition party or the Union-Labor party, and then into the Populist party.

The rhetoric of Kansas Populist leaders was highly moral. Indeed their approach to reform was such that moral and political considerations were virtually one and the same. Christian ethics underlay their appraisal of society, and they were often ready with an apt Biblical allusion in appropriate situations. But contrary to what might be supposed, they were not religious fundamentalists. Of the twenty-two Populists out of eighty-nine whose biographies indicated a religious affiliation, five were Methodists, three were Unitarians, three were Quakers, and three were Congregationalists. The Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Christian Churches contributed one each. Included among these were two Spiritualists and two Agnostics.

There was, among these leaders, general agreement and recognition of the social derivation of evil, a conviction that the conditions of their world had pitted brother against brother and man against immoral society in a contest with the cards stacked devastatingly against society’s disadvantaged legions. For this reason, in religious matters a good many Populist leaders could agree with Samuel Wood, one of their number, when he wrote that “God should be spelled with two o’s (Good); devil without a d(evil). In fact, I reject all the dogmas of the church. My religion
is a sincere desire to do right—to do the most possible good in this world. I believe sincerely in the 'Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.' Or with Mary Elizabeth Lease when she informed religious-minded defenders of the status quo that "it was not christianity but churchanity that she assailed . . . ." Or with Kansas Populist Congressman John Grant Otis when he declared, "Our civilization demands the recognition of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, not upon Sunday only, but upon seven days in the week, and fifty-two weeks in the year." Some no doubt would have agreed with the message of John M. Dunsmore, speaker of the Populist house of representatives in 1893, which he left to be read at his funeral. Dunsmore's "Message of Love," as he called it, stated that he "came into being with a mind so constituted that blind faith in any creed or dogma could never satisfy . . . [his] desire for knowledge concerning the mysteries of life and being." He followed this with the statement: "I have never been able to accept as true the dogmas and creeds of the so-called Christian system." Religion was to him, quoting an authority with whom he was familiar, "The outcome of our ideas about the universe, our response to all that we know, consciously or unconsciously, of cosmic law." If any hint of a fundamentalist strain still remained, Dunsmore took care of that by stating: "As an evolutionist, I looked upon the story of the fall of man as a myth handed down from dead and forgotten ages, and consequently, the dogma of the atonement to be both illogical and unnecessary." But an atheist John Dunsmore was not, and he demonstrated this by quoting another authority, with whom he also agreed, who had written that "while sin remains in the universe, God is defeated: and that everlasting punishment involves an everlasting failure; that sin never injured God, except through man. That it is the God within who is injured, rather than the God without." 

Apparently, quite a few of these leaders were alienated from the churches, but Christian precepts maintained a strong hold on their minds. The safest and perhaps the most accurate generalization that can be made about them is this: if the Populist leadership shared a common theological outlook it would have to
Some expressions of opposition press reaction

Undated cartoon from *Judge*, "The Foolish Appeals of the Political Tramps"

Cartoon dated April 25, 1891, *Judge*, "A Mighty Poor Exchange"

Cartoon dated June 6, 1891, *Judge*, "A Party of Patches"
Cartoon dated May 20, 1894, New York World, “Hard Mowing for Uncle Sam”

A reformer’s view of the Spanish-American War

Cartoon dated August 14, 1898, Topeka Advocate and News, “Now for a War for Humanity at Home”

Annie L. Diggs about 1900

G. C. Clemens Topeka’s Mark Twain

Mary Elizabeth Lease about 1890
KANSAS POPULIST LEADERSHIP

be ethical humanitarianism which served as a yardstick by which they judged their world.

Undoubtedly this element of humanism conditioned their reaction to the problems they recognized were being created by an industrialized society—or was it the other way around? Either way, it is certain that both were an influence in making these leaders of Kansas Populism critical of the Gospel of Wealth. To their way of thinking the popularity of the Gospel of Wealth was merely a measure of the perversion of Christian doctrine to a selfish and ruthless industrial system. At one point Senator William Peffer stated the leadership’s attitude toward the doctrine rather well: in responding to the attack of a minister who considered the Populists anarchists Peffer stated that the minister “is not crazy, nor is he ignorant, nor do I believe he is a bad man. On the other hand, I believe he averages high with the modern Christian, that he will average well with the modern preacher, whose philosophy comes to him from the Middle Ages, and whose ideas of finance come to him through the newspapers which are edited in the business offices.”

A number of the Kansas Populists, moreover, like the popular lady-orator and editor Annie Diggs, were in complete harmony with the Social-Gospel movement; and some, like Kansas Congressman Jerry Botkin, boldly and defiantly proclaimed themselves Christian socialists.

By implication of argument or by direct refutation, Kansas Populist leaders rejected, as well, the so-called philosophy of social Darwinism. The evidence demonstrating their rejection of the social-Darwinian point of view is overwhelming, although it has been largely ignored in the past. Dr. Stephen McLallin, by means of The Advocate, repeatedly assailed Herbert Spencer’s doctrine. In 1891 McLallin published a letter that fairly represented the attitude of the leadership on this matter which stated: “There never was, nor can there be, a more brutal, utterly selfish and despicable doctrine than the Darwinian ‘struggle for existence,’ when applied to the social relations of man. It justifies oppression, the aggregation of wealth in the hands of those able to grasp it, the occupation of everything the ‘fittest’ are able to gain and keep.”
The letter then pointed up, by inference, the tie between the Gospel of Wealth and social Darwinism by indicating that religion had until recently mitigated the influence of the Spencerian rationale, but "Now this sacred ground is invaded. The pulpit is infected with the theories of material science, infected with the crude matter of materialism, which stops short of the halfway boundary between matter and spirit, and sees in man only an objectless animal."10

Kansas Populists were among the first to admit that abilities among men were not equally distributed. They were willing to concede, as did future Populist Congressman William D. Vincent on the eve of the party’s formation, "that some men will grow rich faster than other men under a perfect system of law." The more industrious man, said Vincent, should receive a larger share than his "indolent neighbor." But what about "the sharp unprincipled men?" he asked. To Vincent and fellow Populists, it was clear that strong men needed no special assistance to augment their natural advantages. "They need no special legislation in their behalf," said Vincent. "The object of law is supposed to be protection of the weak against the oppressions of the strong."11

Over and over again Populist leaders stressed this view. To accomplish this purpose they unequivocably supported positive action by state and national government. In taking this position they were ridiculed repeatedly as paternalists, but they were scarcely bothered by the argument. In fact they countered with the argument that the country had had paternalistic government for years. As one unidentified Populist put it, "paternalism for the benefit of the few and powerful at the expense of the masses." Said he, "Every trust and combine, and every corporation is paternalism for the benefit of a class."12 Another, also unidentified, declared that those who were horrified by the paternalistic specotor of government ownership of railroads, telegraph, and telephones had "no fears of the centralization of power in the hands of a few irresponsible men resulting from corporate control of the same franchises, and the absorption of more than one half of the aggregate wealth of the entire country by less than 50,000 people."
Which was more dangerous to American liberty, he asked, "this latter paternalism or the paternalism of all the people?" 

As a group, Kansas Populists gloried in attacking the conventional wisdom—probably because it was employed with such devastating effect against them. Judge Frank Doster, who was the intellectual giant of Kansas Populism, more than any other figure delighted in shocking his more complacent contemporaries. This character trait earned for Doster quite a reputation in Kansas politics by 1896, and in that year his fame crossed over state boundaries, as he was the man the Populists had nominated for chief justice, the "shabby, wild-eyed, rattle-brained fanatic" of William Allen White's nationally-acclaimed editorial entitled "What's the Matter with Kansas?" Doster won that race, and many a conservative reporter clamored at his heels, attempting, by rather pointed questioning, to gauge the reign of terror they were sure was close at hand. The reign of terror was not forthcoming, but Doster gave some brash young reporters some pungent copy. In 1897, shortly after assuming office, the judge stated that he did not "believe in hell fire, nor human slavery, nor high tariff, nor the gold standard, nor in millionaires, nor in the wage system." Just as quickly he added: "I do believe in the Ten Commandments and in the Golden Rule, in the initiative and referendum, and evolution and woman suffrage, and I am edging toward theosophy and Christian science, and open to conviction in favor of any vagrant fad that nobody will admit believing in until enough do to make it respectable." On another occasion Doster told a reporter: "I have been an adherent of socialism all my life. Socialism is coming about through the socialization of what we call the public utilities . . . ." It was his contention that as quickly as matters "become of sufficient public concern, either nationally or locally, they will pass into the hands of the general or local public, and some fine morning, if you live to a good old age, you will wake up to find yourself living in an almost communistic society, having gotten there by transitions so easy and natural you didn't realize their occurrence until the job was done."
G. C. Clemens exceeded Frank Doster in the severity of his attack on the folklore of his times. In 1894 Clemens wrote that government, as viewed by those who controlled it, was “an ancient hand-organ, into which its ante-diluvian manufacturers put certain tunes which must never be changed. It ceaselessly grinds out the Tariff schottische, the Gold-Silver-and-Parity Waltz, the Revenue polka, the exhilarating [sic] gallop—‘Our Foreign Relations,’ and the soothing measures of ‘After Us the Deluge.’” Prior to the Populist movement, continued Clemens, political campaigns had been fought over one all-important issue, “‘Who shall turn the crank?’” At any time in the past when the people had grown weary of the “endless monotony” and had “demanded a change of program,” the disenchanted “have been assured the trouble was with the unskilled or negligent wretch who was grinding the machine; but no matter how often the operator has been changed, suffering humanity’s ears have still been greeted with the same old tunes which were doubtless popular with their progenitors some centuries before the flood.” Finally, wrote Clemens,

a party has arisen to demand a more radical change; which says to the people, “Let us remodel the old organ somewhat, so as to adapt it to modern music, and put into it an entirely new set of tunes. Let us substitute for this antiquated noise the beautiful strains of “The Earth was Made for All,” and “All Men are Brothers Now,” and ... “Poverty is No More.” But the champions of prehistoric melody exclaim in horror, “The impious innovators are going to change our consecrated tunes and even overhaul the sacred machine! Let us redeem the holy noise-box from the blasphemous wretches.”

G. C. Clemens, as previously indicated, was later carried by the logic of his reasoning into the socialist camp. A number of the leaders of Kansas Populism identified themselves as advocates of a moderate or evolutionary socialism, and a portion of that group chose the same course as Clemens after 1898, but they were not all convinced that governmental machinery needed as drastic an overhaul as Clemens desired. Piecemeal change was unquestionably the design of the great majority.
The dominant segment of the Populist leadership in Kansas reasoned, as did Dr. Stephen McLallin, that "Competition, except in the ranks of labor, in the production of farm products, and in the retail of certain lines of merchandise," was a thing of the past. This element readily admitted the efficacy of cooperation and combination. They were willing to accept the organization of industry on a large and systematic scale. They agreed that measures were necessary so that large-scale enterprise could be made to better serve the public interest. They differed on how this was to be accomplished. One element of this group which felt that competition was no longer a practical regulator of industrial enterprise reasoned that the solution was public ownership of those enterprises that were national in scope and clearly affected with the public interest. For many of these individuals, however, as Chester M. Destler has noted, collectivist methods were simply a legitimate means of restoring free enterprise and small competitive capitalism; in particular, they felt government owned and operated railroads would contribute to that end.

Another element of that dominant segment was reluctant to support the solution of government ownership from the beginning—or in certain cases came to that position because of pragmatic politics—and placed their faith in government regulation of large-scale enterprise. The response of this latter group would later be seen more clearly in Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalism and in the second phase of Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom.

Another faction, whose ideas represented a minority view among the leaders but may have appealed to a significant portion of the rank and file, reasoned that large-scale enterprise in the form of monopolies should be abolished so that competition would serve as an effective regulator. Those who took this position would not admit, as many of their colleagues did, that the trust was the logical product of the principle of competition in industry. The conventional wisdom was not easily evaded. Kansas Populist William Marshall must have struck some responsive chords when he pleaded with his fellow reformers to declare: "Natural laws are good enough for us. Competition will do. The provision which God has created cannot be improved upon;
neither can it be violated without injury to ourselves . . . ; consequently we will suppress that instrument of artificialism and oppression, the combine, and restore to its full function and force the natural law of competition. The approach of this faction would subsequently find an influential representation in the first phase of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom.

Besides these fundamental differences, party leaders were to be plagued and torn by numerous problems that can only be understood by studying the history of the party itself in its logical context—from that first whirligig campaign of 1890 to the denouement of the 1896 silver crusade and after. For the moment, suffice it to say that the leaders of Kansas Populism were by no means clodhoppers in the usual sense of that word; they were, on the whole, an extraordinary group of individuals, iconoclastic in their appraisal of society, bold and at times radical in their solutions. Their great problem derived from the fact that they were critics of an emerging industrial order whose strength and opportunity for criticism were largely the result of a wave of discontent made possible by the frustrations and misfortunes of an agarian order functioning within a rapidly industrializing society that paid little heed to the farmer's plight.