

GOLDFINGER, THE GOLD CON-
SPIRACY AND THE POPULISTS

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While it is doubtful that Ian Fleming had ever heard of the Populist movement of the 1890's, many a Populist would have recognized a familiar figure in Fleming's sinister character, Goldfinger. Although the Fleming work is a deliberate, tongue-in-cheek presentation of stereotyped characters, and the Populist literature is written in a serious vein, the two still share a number of themes. Most noticeable is the tendency to interpret history in terms of conspiracy, the use of personalized, symbolic scapegoats to explain relatively impersonal events and a dependence upon ethnic stereotypes.

Professor Richard Hofstadter has observed that the Populists commonly believed that all of American history since the Civil War "could be understood as a sustained conspiracy of the international money power."¹ The conspiracy, for the Populists, was the attempt of the "Goldbugs" to demonetize silver and keep gold as the sole monetary medium. Goldfinger, of course, was also involved in a conspiracy -- "the greatest peace-time conspiracy in the history of the United States" -- a plot to steal America's "golden heart" from Fort Knox and thus cause the country's downfall.²

But who was involved in this conspiracy? Again one notes the similarity between the Populist and the Fleming approach. For both it was a conspiracy with international ramifications. The Populist writers found their villain in Lombard Street and in Wall Street -- the Anglo-American Gold Trust was responsible for the contraction of the currency.³ Goldfinger is also international. He is a Russian agent, a representative of SMERSH, the Russian superspy agency.⁴ Both Goldfinger and the Populist Goldbug have a similar goal: to overthrow the Republic and to enslave the American people. Picturing Goldfinger as a Russian agent leaves no question about this in the reader's mind. He is not only a master criminal, he is also a weapon in the Cold War -- a part of the Communist plot to conquer the world. Compare this with the preamble to the Populist party platform of 1892, written by Ignatius Donnelly: "A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an

absolute despotism."⁵ Anyone familiar with the anti-Communist rhetoric of the Radical Right in this country will recognize the style.

As to Goldfinger's ethnic and racial background, Fleming rejects the temptation to identify his villain completely as a Jew: "What had he been born? Not a Jew . . ." but he does concede that "there might be Jewish blood in him."⁶ Goldfinger, with his avaricious love of gold, fitted too nicely into the traditional stereotype to deny him any Jewish strain. The Populists too, were ambivalent about the Jew. Some condemned racism and anti-Semitism, although at the same time there was a widespread tendency among Populist writers to view the Jew as Shylock. This was especially true in regard to the Anglo-Jewish banker. "Coin" Harvey, for instance, a well-known silver publicist, wrote a novel entitled A Tale of Two Nations in which he has a powerful English banker, Baron Rothe (obviously Rothschild) plot to end silver coinage in the United States and destroy the nation's power.⁷ Although the anti-Semitism of both Fleming and the Populists is mainly figurative, it still helps confirm and extend a popular stereotype.

While there is a temptation to pass off the similarities in Goldfinger and in Populist thought as merely incidental, I believe there are larger implications. Perhaps the most important of these is the inclination of both Fleming and the Populists to personalize evil and to think in conspiratorial terms. In the background of Fleming's work there usually lurks Russian or Chinese Communism. But since this is too abstract a symbol to fight, it must be replaced with a personal figure. Hence Fleming's Anglo-Saxon hero, James Bond (Agent 007), ends up combating superhuman diabolical foes such as Goldfinger or Dr. No, who are the authors of gigantic plots to destroy civilization.

The Populists, too, tended to seek personalized reasons for relatively impersonal difficulties, such as low crop prices or high interest rates. Many of their grievances were real but the causes obscure, so it became convenient to identify evil in a personal sense. Thus "Coin" Harvey has his Baron Rothe; Ignatius Donnelly, in his novel Caesar's Column, produces Prince Cabano; and in The Octopus Frank Norris clothes the abstract force of the railroad in the figure of S. Behrman. None of these characters, needless to say, are Anglo-Saxons.⁸ Norris is of special interest because, as Richard Chase observes, The Octopus contains a "full use of the conspiracy theory of history -- the theory that all would be well with American life if only it were not for the machinations of the money power" While Norris's writings differ from those of the Populists in that he is obsessed with a naturalistic pessimism, he was still strongly under the influence of the agrarian revolt.⁹

Thus, in both Populist lore and in Fleming the personalized conspiracy appears. But when is conspiratorial thinking most common? Generally when political and social tensions are strong and a nation's or a group's problems stem from the impersonal forces of history such as industrialism

or Communism. At times like these some strata of society find it convenient to seek scapegoats for their difficulties.¹⁰ This is certainly one possible explanation for the vast popularity of the Fleming novels and movies: Bond's audiences vicariously participate as, using the most modern devices, he demolishes the evil geniuses plaguing society. Of course, there are many differences between Fleming's work and that of the Populist authors. Most important is that Fleming is writing in whimsical fashion while the Populists are in earnest about what they consider to be important social questions. But the common points of emphasis are striking. For they reveal to us the direction popular thought often takes when confronted by forces that, although disturbing, are distant enough to evade direct confrontation.¹¹

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Footnotes:

¹ Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform from Bryan to F.D.R. (New York, 1955), 70. Hofstadter has been vigorously attacked for his emphasis on the irrational and retrogressive elements in Populism, especially by Norman Pollack. See, for instance, Pollack's main work, The Populist Response to Industrial America (Cambridge, 1962).

² Ian Fleming, Goldfinger (New York [Signet Edition], 1959), 151, 161.

³ Hofstadter, 75, 79; Irwin Unger (ed.), Populism: Nostalgic or Progressive? (New York, 1964), 19-23. See, for instance, Sarah E. V. Emery, Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People (Lansing, Michigan, 1892).

⁴ Fleming, 161.

⁵ Printed in Unger, 37-41.

⁶ Fleming, 25.

⁷ Hofstadter, 77-81; Unger, 12-23. For a criticism of Hofstadter's theory linking the Populists and anti-Semitism see Norman Pollack, "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism," The American Historical Review, LXVIII (October, 1962), 76-80. In a study of Kansas Populism, The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism (Chicago, 1963), Walter T. K. Nugent also denies that the Populists were anti-Semitic or nativistic. But, in rebuttal, see Oscar Handlin; "Reconsidering the Populists," Agricultural History, XXXIX (April, 1965), 10-16, and Irwin Unger, "Critique of Norman Pollack's 'Fear of Man,'" Ibid., 19.

⁸ Hofstadter, 70-81; Handlin, 81; Frank Norris, The Octopus (New York, 1964), 53. Norris says, "There was no denying the fact that for Osterman, Broderson, Annixter, and Derrick [the wheat farmers], S. Behr-

