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**Review of *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics* By Peter H. Argersinger**

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*The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics.* By Peter H. Argersinger. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. Notes, index, source notes. x + 302 pp. \$29.95.

The populist movement of the late nineteenth century continues to fascinate scholars. From almost the moment of the movement's demise, writers were publishing books justifying, condemning, or analyzing the angry farmers and their failure to change American political economy. Waves of revisionism have washed over our retrospective judgement of the People's Party. Peter Argersinger now adds a worthy contribution to both the analysis and the polemic of Populism.

The book consists mainly of a collection of reworked articles that appeared in various journals from 1967 to 1992. At the level of analysis, the author's meta-argument is that the Populists were ultimately unsuccessful because they failed politically. That is, they both failed to manage the ideological tensions within their movement, and failed to overcome various structural impediments placed in their path by the established parties. He elaborates this argument with a series of case studies, following in close detail a number of state conventions and elections. The documentation in these studies is impressive, and the studies themselves are convincingly argued.

In Argersinger's most enjoyable and illuminating chapter, he explores the roots of the movement in Pentecostal religion. He shows the reader how the ideology of Populism, its strength as a mass movement, and its weakness as a potential governing coalition derived directly from its rootedness in the Plains Christianity of the time.

At the level of polemic, Argersinger demolishes Karl Bicha's argument that Populists were primarily conservative, free-market oriented reformers. Using roll-call analysis of the Kansas legislature in the 1890s, Argersinger demonstrates that the People's Party representatives sincerely attempted to institute a

wide range of liberal-to-radical changes. He also explains their inability to implement their designs, despite majorities in both houses in 1897.

This study is clearly written and well organized. Argersinger employs a satisfyingly varied range of methodologies, from close textual analysis to several types of statistics. The book's main weakness is its limited scope. The title warns those seeking an overview of the entire Populist movement that the author's subject is only its western half, but in fact his focus is considerably narrower. One chapter discusses events in Iowa, another in the Dakotas, and another in the national Congress. Aside from these, Argersinger deals almost exclusively with the People's Party in Kansas.

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