

OKLAHOMA POPULISM AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

By Donald K. Pickens*

Historical interpretations—like ladies' fashions—change and sometimes quickly. A given historical interpretation is a complex product: the relationship of human imagination and logic plus the construction of historical materials—newspapers, letters, manuscripts, etc.—created into a meaningful pattern. Without the historian's insight, this process is not significant. The historiographic past, the historian's past, is constantly changing as new materials are discovered (or the old reworked) and as the events under discussion retreat deeper into the time past. Simply, the historian and his subject are caught in the passage of time.

Often, in observing their process among professional historians, one acquires the distinct impression that novel insight (or the desire for a distinguished interpretation) places a given historian in an intellectually awkward position. Richard Hofstadter is such a historian. His account of Populism in his book *The Age of Reform . . .* is a social psychological explanation turning on the questions of status and irrational agrarian reaction to industrialism.¹ The novelty of his interpretation blinds him to the merits of older historical accounts and research methods. Granted a historian deals in irony, paradox and mixed motives in describing and analyzing the human condition, but Mr. Hofstadter's view of Populism is too much an exercise of imagination independent of orthodox research techniques according to one critic. His book soon after its publication in 1955 became the lodestone for anti-Populist historical writing.

In recent years historians have attempted an interpretative reconstruction of Populism, drawing on Hofstadter's analysis. And in all the scholarly revisions some scholars have issued clever accounts demonstrating or attempting to demonstrate that Populism was really a nativistic creed. The Populists, accordingly, were Jew-baiters, militant racists and super-patriots whose political descendents supported McCarthyism.² In brief the

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¹Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, (New York: Knopf, 1955). See the chapter "The Folklore of Populism," pp. 80-93.

²The essays in Daniel Bell, editor, *The Radical Right*, (New York: Doubleday, 1963) develop the notion of the Populists as nativists and as a historic source for popular McCarthyism. The essays, however, are without documentation. Victor C. Ferkins "Populist Influence On American Fascism," *Western Political Quarterly* X (June 1957) also pursues these same themes.

Populists were provincial Anglo-Saxons fighting eastern and alien monopolists. As one scholar wrote "To grasp their illiberalism, one has only to remember that out of Populist back-ground came Tom Watson and Cole Blease, Martin Dies, William Lemke, Huey Long—even Pat McCarran."¹

Norman Pollack attacked this thesis in "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of 'The Age of Reform'" in volume XXVI, November 1960 of *The Journal of Southern History*, pages 478-500. Pollack gives a systematic account of Hofstadter's failure to do basic research in Populist materials located in the various state historical societies. In stressing social psychological concepts, Hofstadter's book, according to Pollack, did not explain properly the merit of traditional interpretations based on social, political and economic circumstances producing the agrarian discontent.

Pollack contends that the dominant themes in Populist ideology: The idea of a golden age, the concept of natural harmonies, the dualistic version of social struggles, the conspiracy theory of history, and the doctrine of the primacy of money were parts of general Nineteenth Century thought. Sharply, Norman Pollack attacks these themes as elements of Hofstadter's internal consistency for his historical model, based on the static assumptions of a consensus theory of history and ultimately a static view of human nature. In brief, Pollack demonstrates that Hofstadter allows his theme—status crisis—to dictate his use of historical materials and research. Ideally, of course, the reverse of this process is desirable.

A study of Oklahoma Populist newspapers suggest that Pollack's criticism of Hofstadter's history is valid.² Psychological analysis, without proper historical documentation, contributes to the unwarranted reconstruction of the past by ignoring basic economic grievances within American society. Oklahoma Populism, if nothing else, expressed the deep rooted problem of making a living on the agrarian frontier.

Hofstadter, an urban liberal in essence, discovered what he considered the source of contemporary patriotic hysteria and anti-intellectualism—Populism. In this judgment, the present is too much with Mr. Hofstadter. History is not always current events, written in the past tense; however, some historians are wont to create history in such a fashion.

¹ Arthur Munn "The Progressive Tradition" in John Higham, editor, *The Reconstruction of American History* (New York: Harper's Torchbooks, 1962), p. 172.

² Donald K. Pickens "The Principles And Program of Oklahoma Socialism, 1900-1915" Master's Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1957. The University of Oklahoma Library. See particularly chapter one. Hereafter cited as Pickens "The Principles And Program of Oklahoma Socialism, 1900-1915."

Supporting Pollack's defense, C. Vann Woodward in his essay "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual" defends the Populist against the revisionist charges of bigotry and narrow economic self-interest.⁵ Woodward notes how the neo-Populism of the New Deal contained a Populistic version of United States history. The differing circumstances of cold war America—the apparent popular support of McCarthyism—caused many intellectuals to feel betrayed by "the will of the people" that intellectuals had glorified in their Populistic treatment of the nation's past. Historiographically, the result was a shift in emphasis to the Populist's nativism and irrational emotions. In fact some historians—already cited—froze their vision to these apparent failings. Suddenly these historians could not live with history (in its older interpretation) and the present situation dictated the switch in characterization from the Populist as the St. George in a morality play version of United States history to the newer role as redneck reactionary.

The balance of Woodward's article deals systematically with charges of Populists being midwestern bigots. Woodward countered their view with a defense of Southern Populism and its many positive achievements.

Using the Woodward thesis, Walter T. K. Nugent, in his discussion of Kansas Populists, provides detailed and solid evidence that they were neither nativists nor a selfish interest group. Naturally, the economic depression of the last years of the nineteenth century contributed to Populist growth.⁶ Nugent claims that later reform developments in the 20th Century "makes it unrealistic even to equate the Kansas Populists with Populist of other regions or other states."⁷ In regard to Oklahoma Populism, Nugent's academic restraint is too modest. An examination of Oklahoma Populist newspapers on deposit in the Oklahoma Historical Society failed to reveal any anti-Jew, or general nativist attitudes.

The Populist movement in other regions and states varied sometimes in marked fashions. Naturally social, economic and political circumstances differed throughout the nation and Populists, to have any degree of success, tailored their tactics and

⁵ The essay is in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1960), pp. 141-166.

⁶ *The Tolerant Populists, Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 165. Hereafter cited as *Tolerant Populists*. For a good summary of Nugent's argument see page 207 of his book.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

sometimes their programs accordingly.⁸ Where poverty was the greatest, Populists were most vocal in demanding radical solutions to the agrarian problems. Of course Henry D. Lloyd's generalization was quite correct, given the electric nature of American political parties, in writing that the "People's party is a fortuitous collection of the dissatisfied."⁹

Norman Pollack in *The Populist Response to Industrial America* claims that Populism and Socialism had much in common; but, "Populism was certainly not Marxism."¹⁰ Pollack's essential analysis and argument is as follows:¹¹

I propose the following historical definition of midwestern Populism: While primarily an agrarian movement it also contained significant support from industrial labor, social reformers, and intellectuals. The interactions between these groups was expressed not in terms of pre-industrial producer values, but of a common ideology stemming from a shared critique of existing conditions. In a word, Populism regarded itself as a class movement reasoning that farmers and workers were assuming the same material position in society. Thus, it accepted industrialism but opposed its capitalistic form, seeking instead a more equitable distribution of wealth. But Populism went further in its criticism: industrial capitalism not only impoverished the individual, it alienated and degraded him. The threat was not only subsistence living, but the destruction of human faculties. According to Populism, there was an inverse relation between industrialism and freedom. Is Populism, then, a socialist movement? Here labels become unimportant; it was far more radical than is generally assumed. Had Populism succeeded, it could have fundamentally altered American society in a socialist direction. Clearly Populism was a Progressive social force.

Pollack's emphasis on the similarities between Populism and Socialism is a revival of an old historiographic opinion on the Populist crusade.¹² The cycle of interpretation was complete.

This controversy among historians over the nature of Populism is germane to an understanding of the Oklahoma People's Party. Pollack's thesis, although based on mid-western Populism,

⁸John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931) contains a full bibliography up to the book's publication date. For later bibliographical developments see Irwin Unger, editor "Populism: Nostalgic or Progressive?" *The Berkeley Series in American History*, Charles Sellers, general editor (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 50-60. Hereafter cited as Unger "Populism: Nostalgic or Progressive?"

⁹Letter from Henry D. Lloyd to Richard T. Ely, October 10, 1899 as quoted by Unger "Populism: Nostalgic or Progressive?", p. 58.

¹⁰(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 98. Hereafter cited as Pollack, *Populist Response*.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

¹²Everett Walters "Populism: Its Significance in American History", *Essays in American Historiography Papers Presented in Honor of Alvin Nashua*, Donald Sheehan and Harold C. Syrett, editors (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 217. Hereafter cited as Walters "Populism: Its Significance in American History."

applies to the Oklahoma situation. In a word, the Oklahoma Populists and Socialists shared a tap root in American radicalism, in their ideology, manner of analysis, sociological support and finally in their common destiny of alienation from Sooner State politics.

In early Oklahoma the Populist and Socialist parties, reflecting the injustices of the rural population, demanded basic changes in society. Varying only in degree of economic and social control emphasized in their programs, they fought the plutocratic capitalists in a colorful and emotional fashion but with high moral and ethical purpose. The Sooner Populists, like the later territorial Socialists, wrote a platform based on local needs. In addition to the Omaha Platform, the People's Party urged ownership to actual settlers, anti-fusion, immediate statehood, the establishment of an elective board of arbitration for labor disputes and a host of minor reforms.¹³

Ideologically the Populists and Socialists presented a common front against the traditional foe of American reform movements—monopoly.¹⁴ Utilizing the ancient cry of equality of opportunity, they stressed the labor theory of value as the only basis for creating an equitable arrangement in society. It was not a case of Oklahoma reformers being intellectually committed Marxists. Rather they saw their efforts thwarted by those who held, what the Populist-Socialist believed, to be an unfair economic advantage. They responded with immediate programs of reforms based on current needs.

Faced with the hardships of the agrarian frontier in the late Nineteenth Century, Oklahoma farmers were easily aware of class differences. Just as midwestern Populists saw this condition, their Oklahoma counterparts claimed that in 1860 the farmer held seventy five per cent of the wealth but in 1894 they controlled only twenty-five per cent. *The Payne County Populist* saw the results of this process in the increases of tenant farmers, mortgage debts, tramps and unemployment.¹⁵ Accordingly, the economic consolidation created the superfluous man, alienated from his work and society.¹⁶ This analysis matches Pollack's definition of Populism.

Economica was a major factor in the life of the Sooner Pioneer farmer. Despite the newness of settlement, farm tenancy

¹³ *The Payne County Populist* (Stillwater), August 4, 1894. This newspaper and all other Oklahoma newspapers cited are located in the newspaper room of the Oklahoma Historical Society in Oklahoma City.

¹⁴ Pollack, *The Populist Response*, 71-72. See also Pickens "The Principles and Program of Oklahoma Socialism, 1900-1918."

¹⁵ (Stillwater), October 23, 1894.

¹⁶ Pickens "The Principles and Program of Oklahoma Socialism, 1900-1918."

rose quickly and despite the efforts of Populists and Socialists continued as a major problem until World War II. Socialist voices and tenancy grew together in the years before the Great War.¹⁷

The causes of farm tenancy varied. One authority suggests, however, the defects in the governmental land system, contributed greatly to the increase of tenancy. These defects, coupled with money lenders and land speculators brought tenancy early to the prairie states of Illinois and Indiana. Started before 1880, the situation spread to the newer territory of Oklahoma where the depression of the 1890's changed free-holders into tenants. The large absentee landowners increased the number of tenant's acres.¹⁸ The inherent hardships—weather, isolation, a new land—were great. The economic situation led to political action and so the People's Party came into being on the Sooner frontier. Small family farmers tried operating in an age of growing corporate agriculture. Caught in a changing economic order, these people turned to the old American method of protest politics.

The Populist and Socialist expressed similar reactions in the territorial platforms. Such Populist planks as government ownership of railroads, communications and all other natural monopolies, abolition of interest bearing bonds, the reduction of the hours of labor, municipal ownership of public utilities, and a graduated income tax, were repeated in the Socialist platform.¹⁹ As expected, the Populist list included the old panacea—free silver—it would increase the amount of money in circulation, thereby raising prices and eliminating poverty so that injustice would disappear, it was "the only cure for hard times."²⁰ said the *Payne County Populist*. Pure Socialism was minor in Populist dogma, although government, the Populists believed, should curb monopoly, thereby creating equality of opportunity. Government banks with county seat branches would stop the unjust activities of the financial capitalists.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104. Pollack, *The Populist Response*, pp. 31-33.

¹⁸ Paul W. Gates "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States" *Journal of Economic History* I (May, 1941), 22. For a similar pattern of development in Texas see S. P. Gullaway "Population Trends in the Western Cross Timbers of Texas, 1880-1960: Economic Change and Social Balance" *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* LXXVII (January, 1964), 386. For a scholarly discussion of interest and general agrarian problems in the midwest see Allan G. Boque (two works, *Money At Interest, The Farm Mortgage On the Middle Border* Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1955) and *From Prairie To Corn Belt, Farming On the Illinois And Iowa Prairies In the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963). Unfortunately, to my knowledge, similar works dealing with Oklahoma do not exist.

¹⁹ Socialist Party of Oklahoma, *Platform and Campaign Book*, 1912 (Oklahoma City, 1912, pp. 3-5). A copy is located in the Oklahoma Historical Society.

²⁰ *The Payne County Populist* (Stillwater), March 8, 1894.

Great differences existed between Populism and Socialism on the national level, but local issues brought them closer together in Oklahoma Territory. The editor of the *Alva Review* remarked, "We do not see the need of organizing a new party at this time as the demands of the Populist party are right in line with those of the new Socialist party, with few exceptions."²¹ Populism in the Oklahoma Territory was a foundation for the agrarian Socialism of later years because of their similar ideological and sociological appeal.

Ten years earlier in 1889 a Nebraska editor expressed a similar opinion: rejection of Socialism as an organized political party but endorsement of its principles.²² Quite possibly contemporaries in the late Nineteenth Century clearly recognized the major and innate ideological and emotional connections between the two movements that were discounted by some later historians.

Occasionally Oklahoma Populists criticized Socialism as premature in the evolution of human society. For example, the editor of the *Newkirk Populist* proclaimed that Socialism was too visionary and immediately unobtainable. Practical problems facing the public, he went on to say, necessitated the use of the present system. In fact, "The Declaration of Independence and the Omaha platform contain probably as much socialism as will be realized within the next hundred years." But there was hope for Socialism, he continued, "if the whole world should be converted to practical Christianity sooner than that hundred years, thus rendering socialism possible, so much the better."²³ Socialism was not completely abandoned: It was placed in the realm of visionary idealism, attainable in the future.

The whole and complex fusion of the Democratic and Populist party nationally is too involved to repeat here. Suffice it to say, the anti-fusion element—the "middle-of-the-road Populists"—were ideologically the most dedicated reformers. In Oklahoma the fusion process was a difficult (and confusion) ordeal.²⁴ Oklahoma non-fusion Populists moved into the Socialist Party. Their Kansas counterparts, "meanwhile had gone 'almost solidly' to the Socialist party."²⁵ In fact, one historian noted that in mid-western United States "there were Populists holding socialist views while remaining consistent Populists."²⁶ This condition also existed in Oklahoma.

²¹ *Alva Review*, November 2, 1896.

²² *Custer County Beacon* (Broken Bow, Nebraska), October 17, 1880. The newspaper is located in the Nebraska Historical Society.

²³ October 3, 1895.

²⁴ Pickens "The Principles And Program of Oklahoma Socialism, 1890-1920", pp. 16-21.

²⁵ Nugent *The Tolerant Populists*, p. 225.

²⁶ Pollack *The Populist Response*, p. 89.

The migration into the promised land of Socialism was the logical result for the dedicated Populists. One major problem in this migration was leadership. Naturally it can be assumed that some Populists went into the Democratic Party when the Populist organization was absorbed. In a quick review, however, it can be pointed out that several important Populist leaders went into the Socialist party.

Thomas Scott Smith followed this pattern. Born in Kentucky, he fought in the Civil War, and came to Oklahoma with the first territorial opening. A newspaper editor by profession, he became a member of the People's Party and later joined the Socialists. Scott ran as the Socialist candidate for congressional delegate in 1902.²⁷

In Woods County several Socialist candidates for county offices came from reform and Populist backgrounds. R. E. Bray, nominee for district judge, was the son of poor parents. As a lawyer, he gave active support to the Populist cause. Bray served as a delegate to the Populists national conventions of 1896 and 1900. When he discovered the true meaning of the class struggle, according to the *Alva* newspaper, he became a Socialist.²⁸ John Randall of Woods County was a candidate for county clerk. A member of the Greenback Party in 1878, he then joined the Union Labor Party and later became a Populist. By 1902, he was an active Socialist.²⁹

A. S. Hawkins was first a Grover Cleveland Democrat in 1884. Disgusted with Democratic politics, he joined the Farmers' Alliance and later he became a member of the People's Party. In 1898 he was the Populist candidate for congressional delegate on an anti-fusion platform. Hawkins, in 1912, was the Socialist candidate for Representative.³⁰

Oscar Ameringer, in his autobiography, related his thoughts on the Socialist-Populist relationship. He recalled how Steuben de Kalb Wham, a founder of the Territorial Populist Party, contributed to the Socialist Party.³¹ According to Ameringer, at the early Socialist meetings "nearly all of the local agitators and speakers were ex-middle-of-the-road Populists and all of old American stock."³² Where else could the non fusionists go? They could not join the Republican Party and they had repudiated the Democrats. With their own organization dead, the Socialist Party was the logical political organization for them. Even

²⁷ *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), July 26, 1902.

²⁸ *Constructive Socialist (Alva)*, August 14, 1912.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, August 21, 1912.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, September 11, 1912.

³¹ Oscar Ameringer *If You Don't Weaken* (New York 1940), p. 278.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 284.

some of the songs at the Socialist encampments were of Populist origin.³³ In summary this pilgrimage in successive third party attempts included leaders and followers in this period.³⁴

Before the Great War and Russian Revolution, the United States held a freer political atmosphere, for indigenous radicalism.³⁵ In the years 1885-1914, before foreign policy and events overtly dictated domestic politics, the conservative patriotism syndrome, created in the emotions of the Great War, did not force radicals into a defensive position or later liberal intellectuals and historians into a painful revision of their legacy of reform from the Populists. Since 1945, however, the situation has changed. In this manner, the earlier interpretation of the Populists became a cold war victim. The past became the present. Historians forever interpret the past, but, whatever future interpretations are forecoming, the Sooner's state Populist and Socialist parties, as a part of America's organic radical past, remains.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 260, 265.

³⁴ Pollack *The Populist Response*, p. 8.

³⁵ For legal and extra legal methods of repression of Oklahoma radicals within a national context see H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917-18* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1967).