American History

Mr. Murray

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Who were the Populists?

“What you Populists need to do is raise less corn and more Hell!”

* Populist organizer, Mary Elizabeth Lease (1890)

While organized labor inched painfully toward acceptance, the other people who suffered most from the economic upheavals of the period were the farmers. The millions of small farmers, principally in America’s West and South, were at the mercy of many forces besides the weather that they were unable to control; eastern banks controlled credit; manufacturing monopolies controlled the price of machinery; eastern railroad trusts set freight prices; depression wiped out land values and sent crop prices spiraling downward. With the population booming and mechanization increasing farm efficiency, it should have been a time of plenty. Instead, farmers were being squeezed tighter and tighter, forced to sell their lands at panic prices and move to factory jobs in the cities.

 But a backlash set in, producing a wave of farm belt radicalism that swept the country. Locally it produced farmers’ organizations called ranges that gained sufficient political clout to press for reforms, although many of these, like the Interstate Commerce Commission, proved to be unloaded guns in the war against monopolies. In the South, for the first time since the end of the Civil War, Poor blacks and working-class white farmers began to see that they shared common problems and interests, and the beginnings of the alliance of black and white farmers emerged. The Farmers also reached out to join with city workers to form a powerful new alliance that could transform American Politics.

 Meeting in St. Louis 1892, the Grangers and the remnants of the Knights of Labor organized the People’s, or Populist, Party. In a national convention later that year, the Populists put together a platform calling for national ownership of railroads and telegraph and telephone systems, a system of keeping nonperishable crops off the market, and a graduated system of income tax. Their platform was an eloquent indictment of the times: “We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized….The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced….The fruits of the toil millions are boldly stolen to buildup colossal fortunes for the few….From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes—tramps and millionaires.”

 These weren’t the ranting of wild-eyed college kids who had just read Karl Marx (father of socialism). The Populists ere working-class, backbone-of-America types who had been pushed too far by the excesses of business in league with government. The men in power did not watch idly. In the South Democrats undermined the Populist organizing effort by heightening racial fears. The mass of urban workers were never draw to Populism, preferring to deal with the Democratic machines that they thought were defending their interests. In the election of 1892, in which Democrat Grover Cleveland recaptured the White House he’d lost four years earlier to Benjamin Harrison, the Populists finished a distant third. But the Populists still made strides as a third party, especially in the farm belt states, where they captured state legislatures, a governorship, and a substantial number of congressional seats in 1894. The two major parties realized that these farmers were a force to be reckoned with.

Cross of Gold

During the next few years the real issues raised by the Populist Party were drowned in an obscure argument over currency. By 1895, the conflict over gold vs silver coins had absorbed all political debate in the country. “Free Silver” became the new Populist rallying cry, a demand to return America to a standard using both silver and gold coins. To many Populists, this simplistic response to the depression brought about by a panic in 1893 seemed to be a cure-all. But it was diversion that camouflaged the serious economic problems confronting the country, and it sapped much of the Populist Party’s energy.

 President Cleveland was a stanch supporter of the gold standard. But when federal gold reserves fell to near bankruptcy levels in 1896 and Cleveland had to turn to J.P. Morgan for a bailout, his political life was finished. Morgan and his associates turned around and sold off at an enormous profit the government bonds they had received and Cleveland was seen as a Morgan puppet, which, in the public eye, was no different from being in league with the devil.

With Cleveland politically dead, some Democrats saw the Populist manifesto as a way to hold on to the White House. A young delegate-at-large from Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan spotted the political gold to be found in the “fee silver” cry and he seized the moment.

 Addressing the Democrats’ 1896 nominating convention, the silver-tonged Bryan captured the audience of 20,000 with a speech regarded as he most thrilling and effective in party convention history . Raising the banner of silver against gold, western farmers against eastern business, Bryan said, “Burn down your cities and leave our farms and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”

 With great theatrical flourish, he concluded, “you shall not press down upon the brow of labor with this crown of thorns,” and extending his arms like Christ crucified. Bryan said, “You shall not crucify mankind on a Cross of Gold.”

 The speech was met with wild acclaim, and the following day, Bryan-who was being subsidized by western silver and copper interests- was named the Democrats’ choice- at age thirty-six the youngest presidential nominee ever. With the Democrats chanting, “Cross of Gold,” the Populist platform had been coopted and the Populist were forced to throw their sport behind Bryan. Populism was Jonah in the belly of the mainstream Democratic whale.