

**Populist Paranoia: The Roots and Style of Agrarian Reform throughout the
Late Gilded Age**

By

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Abstract

The end of the 19th century witnessed a spectacular display of popular discontent in the United States. Anxious and frustrated, agrarian reformers attacked Gilded Age economic and political inequalities and had called for a series of unprecedented public policy proposals. This “Populist impulse” has long drawn the attention of political scientists and historians alike. Many scholars have praised the Populist revolt as a model reform movement for having shed light on serious civic inequities. Any assessment of the Populists however, requires a sober analysis of their disturbing rhetorical and political tendencies. They frequently engaged in scapegoating and adopted a paranoid style of unfounded conspiracy theories. Thus, this paper will attempt to rehabilitate elements of the “Hofstadter thesis” and will promote the revisionist approach towards understanding the Populists. It will do so by analyzing the relationship between the historical and social roots of Populist anxieties and their paranoid style.

gilded (adjective):

having a pleasing or showy appearance that conceals something of little worth

Note to the Reader: In general, there are several different ways to use the word “populist”. By “populism”, with a lower case “p”, this paper refers to its general definition, the political impulse dedicated to defending the interests of “the common man”. When using the term “Populist”, with an the upper case “P”, the essay refers to a specific variation of popular agrarian discontent throughout roughly the last decade of the 19th century. There was also a political party called the “Populist Party” or the “People’s Party” that existed from 1891 to 1908. To reduce confusion, this essay will exclusively refer to this party as the “People’s Party”.

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Introduction

A populist “impulse” has swept through the American political conscience. Grounded in anti-elitist sentiment, the current zeal for reform has reached an intensity and breadth nearly unmatched throughout United States history.¹ After decades of globalization and increased income inequality, grassroots activists from across the political spectrum have launched a crusade against growing economic and social inequities.

In 2009, Tea Party activists waged a second War of Independence, “marching” on Washington to demand fair representation and taxation. A year later, sharp cries sounded from the 99% in Zuccotti Park who were “occupying” Wall Street. Throughout his 2016 presidential campaign, Bernie Sanders spoke of a coming “political revolution” that would “elevate political consciousness” and “revitalize American democracy”². Meanwhile Donald J. Trump, at his record-breaking rallies, promised to “drain the swamp” and Make American Great Again. In the chambers of Congress, lawmakers like Elizabeth Warren have attacked too-big-to-fail financial institutions with Andrew Jackson-like vigor.

At its core, the modern populist impulse seeks to secure “equal rights for all” and “special privileges for none”. “Populism”, as its name would suggest, demands an adherence to the interests of the “common man”. Thus, the populist assault is a defensive one, an effort to guard the “people” against the crony takeover of democracy.

¹ The phrase is borrowed from Richard Hofstadter’s *Age of Reform*

² “About.” *Our Revolution*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.

More than just a set of policy proposals however, populism across America has launched an assault on political procedure—not only on what politics produces, but how politics is conducted. To many on the left, the heightened influence of wealth in politics over the past several decades has transformed American democracy into a hollow web of quid-pro-quo relationships. To some, like sociologist Paul Starr and political scientist Jeffrey Winters, the United States has become a “civil oligarchy”, a democracy dominated by wealth and money.³ To conservatives, the advent of new agencies, laws, and taxes has yielded Washington with responsibilities outside its “few and defined” scope of powers.⁴ The latest slew of regulations during the Obama administration has further infuriated Republicans, a reality highlighted by Rick Santelli’s 2009 burst on the Chicago Mercantile trading floor, rhetorically (or perhaps, literally) asking: “President Obama, Are You Listening?!”⁵

Ethnic and economic changes, irrespective of their net benefit to society, have left Americans bewildered and insecure about their democratic voice. A remark by Steve Bannon best epitomizes the tension felt between an increasingly globalized America and a country insecure about its fluctuating ethnic and economic identity. In a racially-charged conversation with Trump, Bannon reminded the Republican nominee that a country “is more than just an economy...we’re a civic society.”⁶ Context aside, the remark could have well served as the motto for either the Tea Party or Occupy Wall Street movement.

³ Starr, Paul. "How Gilded Ages End." *The American Prospect*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Dec. 2016. Winters, Jeffrey A. *Oligarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2011. Print.

⁴ *Federalist Papers*, No. 45

⁵ Rick, Santelli. Traders Revolt. Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Chicago. Speech. Feb. 2009.

⁶ Clawson, Laura. "Stephen Bannon's idea of 'civic society' is not okay." *Daily Kos*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Dec. 2016.

Thus, modern populists have embraced an angry and frustrated political style. To them, their rage is not only warranted, but necessary. In a telling moment in one of the Republican primary debates, Donald Trump proclaimed that he would “gladly accept the mantle of anger”, receiving a thunderous applause. In an Iowa town meeting, Bernie Sanders told the audience that he was just one of millions of American who were angry. While anxiety, fear, and anger can help breed reform it can also give rise to demagoguery. Some reformers have adopted a hateful and “paranoid” style, scapegoating groups and marginalizing dissenters.⁷ That the United States may have elected a demagogue is a possibility that must be addressed, and one that this research project will help prepare us to analyze through exploration of the most prominent “populist moment” in the nation’s history.

When considering the force, style, and interests of modern populism, it is natural look at the historical background that has helped fueled their rise. Several historical trends across economic, social, and ethnic civic life have helped lay the groundwork for today’s surge in popular activism and demagoguery. Given such changes, scholars of all stripes have explicitly argued that we are living amidst a “second” Gilded Age, one defined by the same elements as its 19th century counterpart. The first Gilded Age, the period spanning from the Civil War’s culmination to the turn of the 20th century, represented a transformative era in this nation’s history. Shaken at its core, the United States saw the rise of labor unrest, robber barons, racial unease, economic anxieties, and political turmoil—a changing American identity.

⁷ Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine* Nov. 1964: n. pag. Print.

From the 1980's to present times, the United States, has undergone an economic, racial, and social revolution in Gilded-Age fashion. Throughout his book, the *Age of Acquiescence*, labor historian Steven Fraser consistently compares the Gilded Age to modern times. Like today he writes, "the Gilded Age was also a time of profound social unease and chronic confrontations...citizens were worried about how the nation seemed to be verging on cataclysmic divisions of wealth and power."⁸ To some extent, writes Fraser, "it has been natural to assume that these two gilded ages...were essentially the same."⁹

That the Gilded Age is a "Tale of Today" is apparent.¹⁰

Income equality has soared to record rates. Since 1975, the share of income for the top 1% has increased almost three-fold, reaching its highest point in the post-war era, a rate surpassed only during the Gilded Age. In his 2013 classic *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty emphasizes the political dangers of heightened income inequality, "potentially threatening to democratic societies and to the values of social justice on which they are based."¹¹

While economic innovation, both then and today, has drastically improved the livelihood of millions of Americans, it has shattered basic economic security and stability for millions others. Joseph Schumpeter's analysis of "creative

⁸ Fraser, Steve *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015. Print. 9

⁹ *Ibid*, 8

¹⁰ The phrase is borrowed from Mark Twain's 1873 classic *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*

¹¹ Piketty, Thomas, and Arthur Goldhammer. *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard U Press, 2014. Print.

destruction”—that “process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one”— could hardly be more relevant when discussing today’s powerful economic forces.¹²

Decades of immigration have transformed United States ethnic identity. The share of the U.S. population that is foreign-born is now 13%, a figure only matched during the Gilded Age.¹³ To many then and now, the increasing diversity has been a tribute to vibrancy of the American melting pot; to others however, it has been proof that America had become a “dumping ground”.

The social disparities among our own times are vividly apparent. A view from the Throggs Neck Bridge in New York reveals a Manhattan skyline of protruding residential towers with apartments worth hundreds of millions of dollars—what The New York Times called “Gotham’s fickle finger of real estate wealth signaling the next Gilded Age.”¹⁴ Miles east in Suffolk County however, lie rows of foreclosed houses in depressed communities struggling with heroin addictions.

The comparison between the late 19th century Gilded Age and our own times is a fascinating one, and one that surely deserves closer attention. To help inform our understanding of the modern political environment and the current surge of populism, it is important to undertake a political analysis of popular movements

¹² Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print. 82-83.

¹³ Gibson, Campbell, and Kay Jung. *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population: 1850-2000*. Rep. Washington, D.C.: Census Bureau, 2006. Print.

¹⁴ Clines, Francis. "What's Happening to New York's Skyline" [nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). The New York Times. December 9 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/02/opinion/whats-happening-to-the-skyline.html?_r=0>.

during the Gilded Age. Like modern times, the chaotic Gilded Age landscape gave rise to a diverse array of energetic popular movements, many of which championed the common man's will against the daunting inequities and racial anxieties of the late 19th century.

Most prominently, it prompted the birth of the "Populists", a group of agrarian activists dedicated to reforming Gilded Age inequalities and excesses. Often, this Populist impulse was channeled toward addressing legitimate political and economic issues of public concern and bridging civic divides. Other times however, it was directed toward mobilizing masses of citizens through demagogic incitement and nativism--exacerbating fears rather than truly answering them.

Specifically, the last portion of the 19th century provides a valuable window into understanding Gilded Age Populism. The decade, a "Populist Era", was packed with one dramatic moment after another, highlighting the anxiety and unease of the period. The Panic of 1893 led to serious economic disarray: stock prices dropped, banks closed and unemployment soared. Agricultural commodity markets collapsed, intensifying agrarian discontent. Labor unrest grew and reached a tipping point during the 1894 Pullman Strike. Workers from the American Railway Union faced off against military personnel sent by President Cleveland to end the boycott, leaving close to 30 dead. Segregation reached an American-low during the "nadir" of American race relations, highlighted by the Supreme Court's affirmation of the "separate-but-equal" doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Political conflict and division came to a climax in the Election of 1896. It pitted William Jennings Bryan,

the legendary opponent of the gold standard, against William McKinley, a staunch defender of “sound money”.

From a political science standpoint, an analysis of the Populist movement throughout the last decade of the Gilded Age is an effective way to help understand the long history and tradition of American populism. Strongly concerned with agrarian issues and republican governance, the rhetoric of the Gilded Age Populists sounded strongly reminiscent of Jefferson’s championing of an “agrarian democracy” and the “yeoman farmer”. Enemies of moneyed interests, the agrarian activists also followed the example of Andrew Jackson.

From an historical standpoint, a study of late Gilded Age Populism is an instructive method to understand the period. A look through the lens of its most ardent critics, those who anxiously sought to reform its defining features, can shed light on Gilded Age notions of citizenship and democracy. Much like today’s “Gilded Age”, its defining elements are traditionally understood as civic illnesses to be eliminated, rather than benefits to be preserved. Indeed, the Gilded Age is so often remembered not for what it represented, but what for it failed to represent—justice, equality, and opportunity.

Methodology

Given the complex interaction between economics, politics, and civic history, the research project demands inquiries into an array of disciplines, which will help shed light on the rich and complex history of popular movements throughout United States history.

Specifically, it will analyze agrarian reform movements from 1891-1904, the time period that could what might accurately be called “The Populist Era”.¹⁵ Like any time boundary, the one employed by this project is to some extent arbitrary. Indeed, popular discontent fared strong throughout the 1880s and well into the 20th century. However, the selection of years is meant to analyze a period of heightened populism within the historical period known as the “Gilded Age”. 1892 marked the formation of the People’s Party, one of the most successful third-party movements in United States history. The election of Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 on the other hand, signaled the beginning of the Progressive Era, another period of drastic reform. In contrast to the Populists, Progressives mainly drew support from the urban middle class, not dispossessed agrarians.

By “Populist”, the project refers to a wide array of anti-elitist sentiment throughout the decade. Thus, the project will and employ promote Richard Hofstadter’s definition of “Populism” as an “impulse” that pervaded throughout the “Populist Era”. Studying it as an “impulse” allows the political historian to understand several facets of Populism. Limiting an analysis to the People’s Party would exclude significant sources of reform sentiment like William Jennings Bryan’s legendary 1896 campaign. After all, one wouldn’t examine the Progressive Era by simply studying the “Bull-Moose Party” or analyze modern populism solely through the lens of the Reform Party.

Several types and sources of evidence are available to help understand the presence of paranoia and anti-pluralism amidst Gilded Age Populism. Primary

sources like party platforms, political speeches, manifestos, and personal papers can directly shed light on the postures, attitudes, and demographic makeup of Gilded Age Populism. This project will employ different materials when answering the “who” and “what” of Populism.

When answering what was Populism, it will study the personal papers and materials of prominent Populist leaders like Tom Watson, William Jennings Bryan, Marion Butler, and Ignatius Donnelly. An analysis of official party materials like the Omaha Platform and the 1896 Democratic National Platform will be helpful as well. Novels, like *Coin's Financial School* or *Caeser's Column*, also shed light on paranoid attitudes throughout the Populist impulse.

This project will also look at reform-minded newspapers across the United States, thousands of which sprouted during the Gilded Age. With respect to this project, the newspapers are an important source of primary research for several reasons. For one, they effectively shed light on grass-roots attitudes at the time. Their provocative language and incendiary positions, having often embraced an angry and paranoid style, exemplified Populist frustration at the time. To many, they could blunt the influence of metropolitan newspapers that had been financially supported by dominant business interests and robber barons. Many Populists disdained the established media, and were willing to fight fire with fire through their own news outlets.

Thus, it will analyze Southern publications like the *Louisiana Populist* (Natchitoches, Louisiana), the *Progressive Farmer* (Winston, North Carolina) and the *People's Party Paper* (Atlanta, Georgia). In the Midwest, it will study the *American*

Non-Conformist (Indianapolis, Indiana), *Topeka Advocate* (Topeka, Kansas), and the *Willmar Tribune* (Willmar, Minnesota). Doing so can help answer both the “who” and “what” of Populism.

The project will also analyze empirical studies concerning the Populists, which will primarily help answer the “who” of Populism. Doing so helps better analyze the roots of the Populist surge.

Literature

Over the past century, the Populists have received much attention from scholars and thinkers. A rich and complex historical debate concerning Gilded Age Populism has thrived since the early 20th century. To some, they were forward-looking reformers who sought to address legitimate economic issues without respect to race. To others, they were backward-looking, reactionary, and xenophobic bigots.

This debate has been frustrating, to say the least. Questions of definitions and critiques regarding selective evidence are widespread. Scholars have defined Gilded Age “Populism” in different ways. Some employ an expansive definition, referring to a reform-minded “impulse” of the 1890s and early 1900s that pervaded throughout all political parties and facets of civic life. Other scholars have exclusively referred to the People’s Party, which existed from 1892 and remained strong until the election of 1896. Thus, scholars have provided conflicting answers to the “who” and “what” of Populism.

In 1931, John D. Hicks presented the first comprehensive account of the Populists in *The Populist Revolt*.¹⁶ His work argued that the Populists were pragmatic reformers who sought to relieve farmers of serious economic distress through unprecedented policy proposals. *The Populist Revolt* was the first piece to take a clear stand in favor of the Populists.

In 1938, C. Vann Woodward, in his landmark work, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*, presented a picture of the Populists consistent with the Hicks model.¹⁷ However, Woodward's work went one step further than Hicks'. Not only did the Populists address legitimate economic concerns, Woodward argued, but they were revolutionary in their appeals to black citizens and their attempts to bridge racial divides. Thus, according to Woodward, they didn't cater to, but mitigated popular paranoid tendencies.

In 1955, Richard Hofstadter's Pulitzer Prize winning *Age of Reform* launched the first revisionist critique of the Populists and "set the terms of the debate over the nature of Populism for at least a decade".¹⁸ Backward looking, paranoid, and advocates of an agrarian dystopia, the Populists were nothing short of divisive demagogues, argued Hofstadter, a "consensus historian".¹⁹ It is no coincidence he

¹⁶ Hicks, John Donald. *The Populist Revolt; A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1961. Print.

¹⁷ Woodward, C. Vann. *Tom Watson: agrarian rebel*. New York: Oxford U Press, 1963. Print.

¹⁸ Miller, Worth Robert. "A Centennial Historiography of American Populism." *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16.1 (1993): 54-69. Missouri State History Department. Web. <<http://courses.missouristate.edu/bobmiller/Populism/Texts/historiography.htm>>.

¹⁹ The term refers to a school of American historiography, prominent in the post-war era, that stressed the unity of American values and downplayed the importance of class-conflict. In his 1948 work *American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter provides a defense of "consensus history": "The fierceness of the political struggles has often been misleading: : for the range of vision embraced by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise."

argues, that the same impulse that called for increased economic reforms also called for increased segregation and xenophobic laws.²⁰ Hofstadter's work sparked tremendous controversy and argument from the get-go.

In the decades following *Age of Reform's* publication, scholars sought to discredit the "Hofstadter thesis", and did so with relative success. Most commonly, critics have charged that Hofstadter, writing in the McCarthy Era, failed to look beyond his contemporary circumstances, used little empirical data, and ignored key pieces of primary research like Populist newspapers. His tract reads more like a think-piece in political theory than a rigorous historical analysis of the Populist era.

Scholars have also taken issue with Hofstadter's characterization of the Populists as "backward looking." Norman Pollack, in his 1976 classic *The Populist Response*, argued that the Populists were primarily class-oriented and simply offered a modern critique of industrializing 19th century America.²¹ In his 2007 work *The Populist Vision*, Charles Postel argues, contra Hofstadter, that the Populists were forward-looking reformers that embraced progress as a means to alleviate agrarian concerns. As Postel stresses however, "modern does not mean good": Populist notions of progress often included proposals grounded in racism.²²

Others have defended the Populists against Hofstadter's charges of xenophobia of racism. Most prominently, Lawrence Goodwyn's 1976 work in *The Democratic Promise*, argued that the Populist "promise" was a biracial effort to alleviate the economic distress of farmers. Ultimately impeded by obstructionists within the

²⁰ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.* New York: Vintage, 1955. Print.

²¹ Pollack, Norman. *The Populist Response to Industrial America.* Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1962. Print.

²² Postel, Charles. *Populist Vision.* N.p.: Oxford U Press, 2007. Print. 9

Republican and Democratic parties, the “promise” to bridge the racial divide through class advocacy was left unfulfilled because of political challenges.²³

A central fault stands out in Goodwyn’s work, however. Critics have charged that Goodwyn grounds his framework with an *a priori* definition of Populism. Those 19th century popular leaders that did espouse racism or nativism are simply excluded from the Goodwyn definition. Thus, critics charge, Goodwyn, too often asked theoretically, “what was Populism?”, rather than empirically, “who were the Populists?”.

Steven Hahn’s 1979 *Roots of Southern Populism* is dedicated to exploring the latter question. Hahn’s work, though confined to Georgia politics, argues that Populist support primarily stemmed from white isolated farmers. While dedicated to addressing legitimate economic issues, the Populists, Hahn argues, had failed to form bi-racial polity.²⁴ Scholars like Stanley B. Parsons and Sheldon Hackney have also proposed their own answers to this question of the Populist “who”, emphasizing the geographically isolated nature of the Populists.²⁵

Goals

This project will partially attempt to rehabilitate elements of the “Hofstadter thesis”, and will highlight the paranoid tendencies of the Populists, using sources of

²³ Goodwyn, Lawrence. *Democratic promise: the Populist moment in America*. New York: Oxford U Press, 1976. Print.

²⁴ Hahn, Steven. *The roots of southern populism: yeoman farmers and the transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*. New York: Oxford U Press, 1983. Print.

²⁵ Parsons, Stanley B. *The Populist Context; Rural Versus Urban Power on a Great Plains frontier*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973. Print. Hackney, Sheldon. *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U Press, 1969. Print.

evidence not explicitly employed by Hofstadter, like newspapers. Perhaps the biggest strength of the “Hofstadter thesis” is its multifaceted approach toward understanding Populism. Rather than pointing to any single factor that gave rise to Populism during the Gilded Age, the approach looks to an array of economic, cultural, and political roots that fueled its surge. However, it will emphasize both the “forward-looking” and “backward-looking” tendencies of the Populists.

In doing so, the project intends to promote a more nuanced understanding of the Gilded Age and the era’s primary source of popular discontent. Reform movements are frequently not given proper blame for instigating paranoia and hatred. Too often, Hofstadter accurately notes, “we exaggerate the measure of agreement that exists between movements of popular reform and the considered principles of political liberalism.”²⁶

Part I will analyze the historical roots of Populist anxieties. Specifically, it will establish an intellectual framework for understanding Populist agrarian frustrations, rural origins, and republican underpinnings through the lens of Jeffersonian thought.

Part II will analyze the social roots of Populist anxieties. It will study the economic, political, and cultural origins of Populist feelings of dispossession.

Part III will study their paranoid rhetoric and postures across an array of civic concerns, which will shed light on the social and historical roots of their anxious tendencies. It will demonstrate that such attitudes were not just present, but

²⁶ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*. 19

widespread across agrarian reform of the 1890s—they were central to the Populist conscience.

Part I: Jeffersonian Roots

Populist rhetoric across newspapers, personal papers, and other publications feature an extraordinarily strong affinity to the life and thinking of Thomas Jefferson. Throughout Populist writings, Jefferson, “the chief Apostle of the common people”, is presented as the benchmark from which to judge proper governance and statesmanship.²⁷ In similar fashion, “Jeffersonianism” is hailed as the standard from which to judge prudent political thinking. The fatal error of the Gilded Age, many believed, had been in “departing from the doctrines of Jeffersonian democracy”.²⁸ Because Populist writings conflate the man himself with the ideology, analyzing their conceptions of each individually helps shed light on their conception of one another.

Understanding the Populist attraction—indeed, their *obsession*--with Jefferson and Jeffersonianism is important for several reasons. First, it helps reveal important facets of Populist identity and conscience, the “who” and “what” of Populism. If understood within the Jeffersonian tradition, the Populists could both be seen as *liberal* and *conservative*. Forward-looking reformers, they, like the author of the Declaration, harbored a natural frustration with the status quo. Backward-looking reactionaries, they desperately sought to preserve a dying Jeffersonian lifestyle amidst rapid urbanization and technological change—they wanted to make agrarian America great *again*.

²⁷ “The Apostle of Democracy” *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

²⁸ Butler, Marion. 1900. Legislative Memo. Washington, D.C.

While Populist writings persistently praise our third President, a closer analysis of their thinking and policy proposals reveals that the Jeffersonian-Populist relationship was awkward from the get-go. Thus, studying this relationship can also shed light on the intricacies of Jeffersonian thought. Indeed, there has long been talk of a vibrant and rich “Jeffersonian tradition” in America. Exactly what that tradition stands for and symbolizes has long been debated in American historiography and political science.

This “Jeffersonian tradition” has inspired an array of popular movements across American history, some that have advocated civic inclusion, and others that have embraced hate and division. In his legendary 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. began by pointing to Jefferson’s proclamation that “We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal.”²⁹ That same year, in his notorious “segregation forever” address, Alabama Governor George Wallace reminded his audience that Jefferson, “a southerner”, once declared that “no King holds the right of liberty in his hands.”³⁰

Today, conservatives claim the Jeffersonian mantle for its trust in limited government while modern progressives point to his egalitarian tendencies. At the 1992 Republican convention, Ronald Reagan declared that it was only he, not William Jefferson Clinton, that was true “friends” with the third President.³¹ Thus, locating the Populists wholly, partially, or barely within the Jeffersonian tradition

²⁹ King, Martin Luther, Jr. ““I Have a Dream Speech”.” Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. 28 Aug. 1963.

³⁰ Wallace, George. “George Wallace's 1963 Inaugural Address.” Alabama State Capitol, Montgomery. 14 Jan. 1963. Speech.

³¹ Reagan, Ronald . “Speech of the Former President at the 1992 Republican Convention.” 1992 Republican Convention. Astrodome, Houston. Aug. 1992. *American History*. Web.

can help better identify and understand this too-often amorphous stream of political thought in America.

All Politics is Personal: The Appeal of Thomas Jefferson

In many ways, the affinity of agrarian activists to the biography of Jefferson was a natural one. Jefferson, a statesman, architect, and thinker, was first and foremost, a farmer. Of course, the image of the Jeffersonian farmer is one that could appeal to reform movements in general, not just the Gilded Age agrarian activists. For one, the farmer has often represented the diligent and hard-working “small-man” of the highest integrity that stands in contrast to pompous oligarchs. He epitomizes the superior and holy agrarian lifestyle that facilitates spiritual and civic growth. Horace Greeley, for example wrote that, professionally, he would recommend farming to his children, because “it is that vocation which conduces most directly to a reverence for Honesty and Truth.”³²

Agricultural life served a central civic, cultural, and economic purpose in Jefferson’s worldview, a reality that could appeal to the downtrodden farmers of the Gilded Age. To Jefferson, it was the lifestyle most conducive to cultivating republican citizenship. A 1785 letter to John Jay written by Jefferson declares: “Cultivators of the earth are most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country”.³³ They are the

³² "The Yoeman." *The Yoeman*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2017.
<<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/Yoeman/yman3.html>>.

³³ Jefferson, Thomas . Letter to John Jay. 23 Aug. 1785. Paris: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *The Avalon Project*. Yale Law School. Web.

“chosen people of God.”³⁴ Thus, Jefferson often looked to the “yeoman farmer for inspiration for the new American project”.³⁵ An 1895 *Advocate* article quotes Jefferson as saying that the “small landholders are the most precious part of the state.”³⁶

Like Southern Populists such as Tom Watson or James Vardaman, Jefferson was a man of the South. He thus could be seen as a Washington outsider and a foe of the Yankee North, a reality that could have strongly appealed to the Populists. To mid-Western reformers like William Jennings Bryan, Jefferson may have been viewed as something of a geographic progenitor. After all, his initiation of the Lewis and Clark expeditions and purchase of the Louisiana territory gave birth to the “Mid-West” and much of the American West in the first place.

The yeoman farmers of the 1890s thus reserved affection for Jefferson. To them, Jefferson epitomized agrarian heroism in the face of adversity, a reformer amidst high-minded oligarchs. A People’s Party Paper article praises his career in the Virginia Legislature for “ousting” the “high born creatures” of the Virginia aristocracy which was “a monument to his worth, loftier than sculptor could raise, and more enduring than marble or brass.”³⁷ Not just an activist, Jefferson was also the wisest of thinkers to Populists. An 1893 People’s Party address writes that

³⁴ Jefferson, Thomas, and William Harwood. Peden. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Ed. with an introduction and notes by William Peden. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1955. Print.

³⁵ Krause, Paul Joseph. "Claiming Thomas Jefferson: The Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian Genesis of American Progressivism - Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History." *Claiming Thomas Jefferson: The Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian Genesis of American Progressivism - Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Feb. 2017.

³⁶ "On Jefferson's Birthday." *The Advocate* [Topeka] 27 Nov. 1895: n. pag. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspaper*. Library of Congress. Web.

³⁷ "The Apostle of Democracy" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

Jefferson's words "were priceless gems of American wisdom."³⁸ In this respect of course, the Populist admiration of Jefferson is hardly unique—his canonical political writings have long been held sacred in the American constitutional conscience.

A Jefferson skeptic could point out however, that this so-called "people's champion" was an extraordinarily affluent member of the aristocratic class himself.³⁹ A Populist could well respond that Jefferson was as simply a "traitor to his own class".⁴⁰ "Though an aristocrat by birth, and a man of wealth" writes a People's Party Paper article, "special Privilege aroused his (Jefferson's) inveterate hatred" and "class distinctions were his abomination."⁴¹ In hindsight, a modern defender of Jefferson could accurately note that the greatest reformers and "privilege-busters" in American history—Andrew Jackson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt—were multimillionaires themselves, with the latter two born to wealth. After all, "to beat your enemy, you must know them".⁴²

At times, the Populist attraction to the biography and thinking of our third president became obsessive. When approached with policy quandaries, activists often looked towards the personal opinions of Jefferson, asking what he would do "if he were alive today".⁴³ To some, Jefferson harbored near-prophetic powers. "Were

³⁸ "People's Party Address." Indianapolis . Nov. 1903. Address.

³⁹ Not as rich as Trump appears to be, Jefferson was worth \$212 million in modern dollars—still a healthy sum. Sauter, Michael B., and Thomas C. Frohlich. "The Net Worth of American Presidents: Washington to Trump." *247wallst.com*. N.p., 10 Nov. 2016. Web. 02 Feb. 2017.

⁴⁰ The phrase is borrowed from the title of H.W. Brand's Pulitzer-prize winning biography of Franklin Roosevelt: "Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt"

⁴¹ "The Apostle of Democracy" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print

⁴² While its origination is unknown, this quote is sometimes attributed to a variation of Sun Tzu's declaration in the *Art of War* that "if you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles..."

⁴³ "If Jefferson Were Alive Today?" *Louisiana Populist* [Natchitoches] 16 Nov. 1894: n. pag. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. Web.

Jefferson's early warnings concerning the bankers, aristocrats, and oligarchs well founded," asks a People's Party Paper article?⁴⁴ They were not just true, answers the newspaper, but "*appallingly* true."⁴⁵ In fact, "he predicted that the special favors granted by the government to the National Bankers would result in creating an aristocracy of Capital."⁴⁶

They also reserve acclaim for Jefferson's ideological successor, Andrew Jackson. "Old Hickory", like Thomas Jefferson, deserved the highest of acclaim for tackling civic inequities and defending the yeoman farmer against corrupted financial interests. Born into a poor agrarian family and later the wealthy owner of the 1,000 acre "Hermitage" farm, Jackson has long been remembered, both today and by the Populists, as the perennial "people's president" and forefather of Jacksonian Democracy.

The ideological lineage between Jefferson and Jackson was well appreciated by certain Populists. In a letter from William Jennings Bryan to the chairman of the Nebraska Jackson club, the Nebraska statesman writes that "the name of Jefferson should be linked with that of Jackson for the latter courageously applied to the conditions existing at his time the principles taught by the former."⁴⁷ An array of Populist publications called for the return to "Jeffersonian and Jacksonian principles", implying that the two were synonymous with one another.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ "Evils Foretold" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Bryan, William J. Letter to I.J Dunn. 4 Jan. 1895. MS. Omaha, Nebraska.

⁴⁸ Butler, Marion. "To The Members of the People's Party And To All Voters Who Are Opposed To The Single Gold Standard." Letter. Jan. 1896. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. Print.

Hamiltonian Hatred

The Populists reserved a special disdain for Alexander Hamilton and his legacy, a reality emphasized by several Populist newspaper writings. By viciously denigrating Hamilton's legacy, the writings elevate Jefferson on a holy pedestal, contrasting a nefarious financial oligarch with an altruistic agrarian democrat. Like their memories of Jefferson, they made little effort to distinguish between Hamilton the man and Hamiltonianism the political program, conflating the two. To the Populists, Hamilton epitomized financial greed, privileges, and the industrial usurpation of democracy. Whereas Jefferson had made his living toiling the rich farmland of Monticello (and making his slaves toil the land), Hamilton earned his fortune in a law office working for a damned bank tucked away in the cramped streets of New York's financial district.

Studying this hatred is significant for several reasons. First, it helps one better understand the American historical roots of Populist paranoia. To many, Hamilton was guilty of political and financial conspiracy, just like the British and King George had been years before him. His political motives were nefarious and his public policy proposals reeked of corruption. A People's Party Paper article reflects this cynical attitude toward Hamilton. "When Jefferson entered national politics", writes the article "he found Hamilton developing his schemes and carefully laying his plans".⁴⁹ His plan to fund post-Revolution state debts for example, was nothing but a

⁴⁹ "Federalism Against Democracy" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

“plot to get the money and the wealth of the country into the hands of a favored few.”⁵⁰

In his Pulitzer Prize winning work *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Bernard Bailyn emphasizes the importance of paranoia to the Revolutionary republican spirit. As Bailyn points out throughout his book, there is something wholly American about conspiracy mongering. To the colonists, “they were faced with conspirators against liberty” who had a “settled, fixed plan for *enslaving* the colonies”⁵¹. Perhaps the most paranoid of this founding generation had been none other than the founder of American populism, Thomas Jefferson. As early as 1774, he declared in a pamphlet that

“though single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day...a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguished period and pursued unalterably through every change of ministers, too plainly prove a deliberate and systematical plan of reducing us to slavery.”⁵²

Specifically, many colonists pointed to a centralized “‘monied interest’ created by ‘the crown’s financial necessities and the power of a newly rise arrogant, and irresponsible capitalist group, that battered on wars and stock manipulation’”.⁵³ Its survival had depended on unjust tax collection and political oppression. To the Populists, Hamilton was simply a progenitor this corrupted financial class. A *People’s Party Paper* article writes that Hamilton epitomized “the spirit of monarchy,

⁵⁰ “Jefferson’s Fears” *People’s Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

⁵¹ Bailyn, Bernard. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992. Print. 95, 119

⁵² *Ibid.* 120

⁵³ *Ibid.* 119

of aristocracy, (and) of class rule” and was “the leader of these enemies of Democratic principles”.⁵⁴ Later, the article belittles the Hamiltonian tradition as nothing more than an excuse to facilitate crony capitalism and the return of aristocracy:

“Wherever special privileges are asked for favored industries, Hamilton’s Report on Manufactures is ransacked for arguments. Whenever legislation intended for building up of a moneyed aristocracy as a partner in the Government is desired by capitalists, Hamilton’s plea for the National Bank is trotted. Whenever the speculator demands the turning of the Paper Money, which pays no interest, and which form the basis of Banker’s money, Hamilton’s ideas on funding come into play”.⁵⁵

Thus, many clung to the legacy of Jeffersonian Democracy instead of the legacy of the Hamiltonian program. An 1893 article exalting Alexander Stephens and Thomas E. Watson reflect their hatred for Hamiltonianism and their corresponding worship of Jeffersonianism. The article writes that Stephens, the former Vice President of the Confederacy, stood “for Jeffersonian Democracy and the masses against Hamiltonian Democracy and the classes”.⁵⁶ In a similar style, the article notes, Thomas Watson, the fiery Congressman from Georgia, was an advocate “for Jeffersonian Democracy and legislation...against...Hamiltonian Democracy and Plutocracy to suit the Plutocrats of the East and Fraudocrats of the South.”⁵⁷ Another People’s Party Paper flings an implicit swipe at Hamilton’s legacy, writing that “all the early fathers of

⁵⁴ “Enemy of Democracy” *People’s Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

⁵⁵ *People’s Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

⁵⁶ “Alex. Stephens and Tom Watson” *People’s Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

democracy opposed internal improvements". According to this logic, Hamilton, a fierce proponent of infrastructure development, could not accurately be called a "father of democracy".⁵⁸

Second, the Populist disdain of Hamilton sheds light on their anti-pluralist tendencies and divisive postures. As Hofstadter notes, "the Populists adhered...to a kind of social dualism" and thus viewed Gilded Age society through simplistic divisions.⁵⁹ It was a battle of "The people versus the interests, the public versus the plutocrats, the toiling multitude versus the money power", and of course, Jeffersonianism versus Hamiltonianism.⁶⁰ In his 1892 campaign book *Not a Revolt; It Is a Revolution*, Watson depicted the events of the year as a "replay of the historic confrontation between Hamilton and Jefferson in 1792 over whether country was to be governed by a "moneyed aristocracy supported by special privilege."⁶¹ For all intents and purposes, there had only been two classes—"tramps and millionaires", one of which was represented by Jefferson, and the other by Hamilton.⁶²

Their rejection of Hamiltonian *ideals* as nothing but a crony conspiracy is disturbing to many modern observers of American political thought, and rightfully so. In hindsight, Hamiltonian ideals are often credited with conceiving landmark economic and political developments that have significantly bettered civic life. Several examples readily come to mind: the assumption of state debts following the revolutionary war, the birth of Marshall jurisprudence, the development of Henry

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 64

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 65

⁶¹ Fraser, 97

⁶² "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party."

Clay's economic system, and in the 20th century, the construction of the Interstate Highway System. Even from the standpoint of the 1890s, Populist leaders and rhetoric ostensibly rejected decades' worth of Hamiltonian thinking that helped glue together a nation through its tumultuous first century. After all, Hamilton authored an overwhelming majority of the Federalist Papers, the most influential think pieces of American constitutional governance.⁶³

What's more disturbing is that, at times, Populist thinking seemed to attack not just Hamiltonianism, but the wider school of early Federalist thought with which he is associated. Populist writings called upon activists to stand up against "Madison and Hamilton Nationalism".⁶⁴ The attack on Madison, "the father" of the U.S. constitution and a Democratic-Republican like Jefferson, is perhaps even more disconcerting. The magnitude of Hamiltonian and Federalist contributions to the early American republic and modern society are without doubt.

Jeffersonian Republicanism

That many Populists deeply admired Jefferson and Jackson and hated Hamilton, is clear. That they also understood themselves within the "Jeffersonian" camp is apparent as well. Throughout Populist writings and materials, Jeffersonian republican doctrine is presented as the true democratic school of thought. The People's Party Paper, for instance for instance, hails Thomas E. Watson as the "true advocate of Jeffersonian principles."⁶⁵ Many had yearned for the return to the "great

⁶⁴ "Untitled Article" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] Oct. 1893: n. pag. Print.

⁶⁵ "Untitled Article" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] Oct. 1893: n. pag. Print.

fundamental principles of Republican government as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, and as advocated and practiced by Jefferson.”⁶⁶

In similar fashion, the Populists understood themselves as progeny of the Jacksonian tradition. Populist writings display a strong attachment to Jacksonian ideals. Slogans of newspapers and political posters for example, would often trumpet the Jacksonian credo: “Equal Rights For All, Special Privileges for None”.⁶⁷ Robert Remini, in a Jackson biography, writes that Jacksonian Democracy played a significant role in inspiring the Populist movement.⁶⁸ Gene Clanton writes that “Populism in many ways represented the last significant expression of an old radical tradition that derived from Enlightened sources...that bore the distinct imprint...Jacksonian, and Lincolnian democracy.”⁶⁹

For the political theorist or historian however, it would be wrong to place the Populists within this stream of American political thought given their professed sense of self-identity alone. Calling them “Jeffersonian” or “Jacksonian” says just as much about the ambiguities of the doctrines as it does about the Populists. In fact, prime facie, many components of the populist impulse ostensibly clashed with many facets of the “Jeffersonian” and “Jacksonian” legacies.

⁶⁶ Butler, Marion. 1900. Legislative Memo. Washington, D.C.

⁶⁷ *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] n. pag. Print.

“People's Party Candidates for President and Vice President 1892.” *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, Washington, D.C., 1892, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/populism-and-agrarian-discontent/resources/people%E2%80%99s-party-campaign-poster-1892.

⁶⁸ Remini, Robert V. *The life of Andrew Jackson*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988. Print.

⁶⁹ Clanton, O. Gene. *Populism: the humane preference in America, 1890-1900*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991. Print. xvi

Thus, one must look towards other methods of locating the Populists within the Jeffersonian stream of thought. When doing so, two important historical realities stand clear and are worth assessing. For one, Populist *methodology* embraced ambitious national proposals to tackle pressing civic and economic dilemmas. Ultimately however, Populist *ideals* aimed to perfect American republicanism by preserving an agrarian lifestyle. Thus, they were willing to call for new national programs and a broad interpretation of the constitution to reform what had become the late 19th century status quo. One might say that the Populists called for the employment of Hamiltonian “means” to pursue Jeffersonian “ends”. However, the question still persists as to whether one should primarily understand them in terms of their methods or their goals.

The first and most simplistic method of assessing the Populist legacy is by analyzing their public policy proposals. If simply judged by the content of their policy suggest alone, it would be natural to place the Populists well outside the Jeffersonian school of thought. Instead, one could place them within the “Hamiltonian” school, an awkward reality given their personal hatred for the man himself.

Often associated with the thinking of Alexander Hamilton and early streams of Federalist thought, Hamiltonianism is primarily characterized by the belief that a powerful and energetic central government would best serve the national interest. In contrast to Jeffersonian legal and political philosophy, it advocates a broad interpretation of the Constitution, specifically of the Necessary and Proper clause.

Such an approach was legitimate because it allowed Congress to propose national solutions to national problems.

In contrast, legally and politically, Jefferson was a staunch defender of states rights and a restrained central government. Often remembered as the founder of “strict constructionism”, Jefferson famously called for a narrow interpretation of the constitution, limiting the powers of the federal government. A powerful central government, he believed, posed not just a dangerous but an existential threat towards democracy. The Jeffersonian position is inherently a cynical one—it distrusts authority.

In stark contrast to the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian position, the Populists had called for an energetic federal government to help curb corporate and financial excess. The People’s Party Platform of 1892, or the “Omaha platform”, for instance, declared that the “government should own and operate the railroads in the interest of people”⁷⁰. As Fraser points out, it “showed none of the aversion to big government that had once been an axiom of the Jeffersonian persuasion.”⁷¹ In his legendary “Cross of Gold” speech, William Jennings Bryan argues at great length in favor of national programs like the federal income tax and the federal power to coin money.⁷² Georgia Senator Tom Watson famously called for “Rural Free Delivery”, the largest expansion of the federal postal service ever. Their inflationary monetary postures contrasted sharply with Jackson’s hard money stance.

⁷⁰ *The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Feb. 2017.

⁷¹ Fraser

⁷² Bryan, William J. "Cross of Gold Speech." 1896 Democratic National Convention. Chicago. 9 July 1896. Speech.

Indeed, the Populists in the 1890s were one of the first national political movements to call for national programs to effectively solve national problems. Today, the Populists are credited with having spurred some of the central legislative and policy fixtures of the Progressive and New Deal Eras that expanded federal power. As Hofstadter points out, "Populism was the first modern political movement of practical importance in the United States to insist that the federal government has some responsibility for the common weal."⁷³

However, one must analyze Gilded Age Populism, or any popular movement for that matter, as more than just a set of policy proposals; it must be understood as an *impulse*—a disposition and attitude dedicated to reforming economic and political excesses. A proper method of locating Populist thought is to identify their ultimate goals of reform and their heroic efforts to preserve republican civic life. If the political scientist or historian is to find any coherent line of Jeffersonian or Hamiltonian thought among statesmen or movements in American life, he or she must primarily look to their ultimate goals, not their respective policy methods. Policies are fluid; they shift from generation to generation and from platform to platform for specific dilemmas and issues. Ideals on the other hand reflect the inner consciences and psychologies of political movements. They are ends in themselves. When properly judged by their ultimate goals—their efforts to promote republican virtue and to preserve agrarian life--the Populists fall squarely within the Jeffersonian tradition in United States historiography.

⁷³ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 61

A Populist Paradox

An obvious paradox presents itself. Why might a movement so devoted to republican ideals and so infatuated with Jefferson embrace sweeping national government programs? How could any popular movement for that matter, so distrustful of authority, and so concerned with equality, call for the increased centralization of power? Understanding this “Populist paradox” is of utmost importance not least because it helps the political scientist or historian study the Populist Era, but because it also helps shed light on popular movements throughout American history.

Often, the answer is simply a willingness to embrace a practical posture towards solving inequities of pressing concern. After all, popular movements are *political* movements; human endeavors, they are flexible and concerned with pressing short-term goals. Thus, the Populist embrace of pragmatism reflected their feelings of desperation and anxiety amidst daunting Gilded Age inequities. Despite their intense hatred of Hamilton and Hamiltonianism, they were willing to advocate for ambitious federal programs to alleviate agrarian woes. Unprecedented problems had called for unprecedented solutions, and the Populists did not have the privilege to stand on principle. Goodwyn points out that “The rules of commerce had changed and Populists knew it”.⁷⁴ “Laissez faire could scarcely speak to mortgage-ridden farmers”.⁷⁵

Some Populists were well aware of this paradox, and took effort to reconcile their beliefs in Jeffersonian ideals alongside their affirmation of large government

⁷⁴ Goodwyn, 379

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 378

programs. In fact, they criticized the feeble “laissez-faire” posture towards approaching dilemmas of pressing civic concern. A legislative-memo written by Marion Butler arguing against a bill sheds light on this paradox in its defense of Populist pragmatism. It claims the Jeffersonian mantle from that “school of politics which contends that there certain things the government should not do even when a great wrong exists that should be righted”⁷⁶. “A believer and a follower of Jefferson”, he argues that the laissez-faire “school of politics” misinterprets Jefferson’s declaration that the “best government is the government that governs least.”⁷⁷ “There is no better friend of Monopoly”, writes the People’s Party Chairman, “than the so-called representatives of Jefferson who uses the above quotation as an excuse for not doing what the public interest demands to be done.”⁷⁸

What Jefferson believed, argues Butler, “was that the best government that went so far in the exercise of governmental functions as it was necessary to go to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak.”⁷⁹ If “Jefferson were alive to-day”, he would shirk away from these “defenders of special privileges”.⁸⁰ Instead, argues Butler, he would support national collective efforts in Populist-fashion. After all, “he favored putting the post office in the hands of the Government, because it was a natural monopoly.”⁸¹

Indeed, Jefferson, despite his affirmation of lofty political principles in the Declaration, was a realistic and pragmatic president himself. That he may have

⁷⁶ Butler, Marion. 1900. Legislative Memo. Washington, D.C.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

agreed with Butler's assessment is a possibility worth considering. As president, Jefferson purchased the massive Louisiana territory from Napoleonic France, doubling the size of the United States. Prime facie, the purchase conflicted with Jefferson's strict and narrow interpretation of the constitution—much like the Populist advocacy of federal power. Nowhere was the federal government explicitly granted the power to execute the Louisiana transaction.

Instead, Jefferson well understood that “the purchase would ensure the pastoral nature of the United States...and would promote the development of a virtuous Republican citizenry.”⁸² Like the Populists, Jefferson was ultimately concerned with his republican goals, and refused to stand on principle when faced with an offer of this magnitude. Of the purchase, Jefferson wrote that “strict observance of the written laws is doubtless one of the high duties of a good citizen, but it is not the highest. The laws of necessity, of preservation, of saving our country when in danger, are of higher obligation.”^{83,84}

In similar fashion, President Jackson never shirked from the opportunity to veto legislation that threatened republican values. Old Hickory exercised executive power, traditionally a Jeffersonian fear, to fend off creeping financial interests and oligarchs. In his 1832 “Veto Message Regarding the Bank of the United States, “King Jackson” declared that a National bank would “be subversive of the rights of States,

⁸² Balleck, Barry. "When the Ends Justify the Means: Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 22.4 (1992): 679-96. Web. 09 Feb. 2017.

⁸³ *Ibid*

⁸⁴ Jefferson, Thomas. "Thomas Jefferson to John B. Colvin." Letter to John B. Colvin. 20 Sept. 1810. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. Web.

and dangerous to the liberties of the people.”⁸⁵ The rise of pressing dilemmas had called for the use of unprecedented federal executive power.⁸⁶

To some however, the choice wasn’t between federal power and laissez-faire, but between increased federal power or oligarchic power. To many, financial and industrial elites had abrogated powers and duties that should only be reserved for the federal government. James Weaver for example, the 1892 People’s Party candidate for president, wrote in his campaign book *A Call to Action* that “The right to issue the currency and to determine the money supply for sixty-three million people and their prosperity, have been leased to associated speculators.”⁸⁷ In his “Cross of Gold” speech, William Jennings Bryan argued at great length against placing “legislative control in the hands of foreign potentates and powers.”⁸⁸

Reformers: A Populist Vision

The Jeffersonian ideals of the Populists could largely be broken down into two parts. First, many sought to disrupt the status quo and overthrow an oppressive “regime” run by corrupt oligarchs, like Jefferson had done a century earlier. Many were seriously intent on tackling pressing inequities, a reality for which they deserve great credit. This “liberal” and “forward-looking” tendency was vividly apparent throughout Populist rhetoric. The Omaha Platform talked of a nation “brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin” and sought “to restore

⁸⁵ Jackson, Andrew. "President Jackson's Veto Message Regarding the Bank of the United States." Washington. 10 July `832. *Avalon Project*. Web.

⁸⁶ President Jackson exercised the veto power twelve times throughout his administration, what was then an exceptionally large amount.

⁸⁷ Weaver, James B. *A Call to Action*. New York: Arno Press, 1974. Print. 10

⁸⁸ Bryan, William J. "Cross of Gold Speech."

the government of the Republic to hands of the 'plain people'"⁸⁹. Tom Watson titled his 1892 campaign book "Not a Revolt; Its A Revolution" to highlight the rebellious nature of the Populist impulse.⁹⁰ Accordingly, many called for unprecedented reforms, like the nationalization railroad and banking industries. As Postel points out, "The Populists challenged the corporate frameworks. They protested the inequitable distribution of wealth. They demanded more responsive government."⁹¹

Reactionaries: The Agrarian Myth

Also central to the Populist conscience was its devotion to Jeffersonian agrarian life. As Hofstadter points out, "The utopia of the Populists was in the past, not the future" and "looked backward with longing to the lost agrarian Eden."⁹² Specifically, Hofstadter notes, many had looked back to the early 19th century as a paragon of agrarian life. Their dedication to rural life was closely related to their frustration with the status quo; the Gilded Age economic order threatened independent rural life for millions of farmers in the South and mid-West.

Agrarian life was also in significant measure a means to an end for many Populists. Because the agrarian way was most conducive to honorable civic life, the Populists feared the destruction of republican virtue. In *Agrarianism in American Literature*, Thomas Inge identifies several components of "agrarian" ideology. For one, the cultivation of the soil "has within it a positive spiritual good" which facilitates "honor, manliness, self-reliance, courage, moral integrity, and

⁸⁹ "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party."

⁹⁰ Watson, Thomas E. *The People's Party Campaign Book, 1892*. New York: Arno Press, 1975. Print.

⁹¹ Postel, vii.

⁹² Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 62

hospitality.”⁹³ In contrast to urban professions, it is the only occupation that affords self-sufficiency. A model worker, the agrarian man “has a sense of identity, a sense of historical and religious tradition, a feeling of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region, which are psychologically and culturally beneficial.”⁹⁴

Thus, many Populists had conjured dystopian images of a lost agrarian life, one that could offer the discontented farmer political and economic dignity. In his biography of Andrew Jackson, People’s Party Senator Tom Watson declared “that during the first half-century of our existence, we had no poor. And a pauper class was unthought of: a beggar, or a tramp never seen.”⁹⁵ Sarah E. Van De Vort Emery’s *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People* paints a more vivid backward-looking utopia that champions the American laborer:

“Thirty years ago the American laborer was a prospective lord. He saw within his reach a home of plenty for his family, and an old age of comfort for himself. The bright picture before him inspired industry, economy and sobriety, and the laborer was a peaceful, sober, respected citizen.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Inge, M. Thomas. *Agrarianism in American literature*. New York: Odyssey Press, 1969. Print.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*

⁹⁵ Watson, Thomas. *The Life and Times of Andrew Jackson*. Thomson: n.p., 1912. Print. 325

⁹⁶ Emery, Sarah E. Van De Vort. *Seven financial conspiracies which have enslaved the American people*. Lansing, MI: Emery and Emery, 1894. Print. 11

Part II: Dispossession

To best understand Gilded Age Populism, one must understand the Populist conscience. As Hofstadter aptly notes, we can best understand our “political psychology through our political rhetoric.”⁹⁷ An array of political, cultural, and economic anxieties had produced a sense of victimhood among the Populists. Ultimately, the new Gilded Age civic landscape could offer to these devoted agrarians little solace.

The Populists’ sense of loss and suffering should draw sympathy from an observer of the late 19th century. Their plight was a noble one, an effort to save a dying virtuous lifestyle amidst uncontrollable and “destructive” economic forces. On the other hand, their self-prescribed sense of victimhood should draw concern and caution from the political scientist or historian. One of the disturbing realities of American history (and all history for that matter) is that the greatest civic sins and crimes are frequently perpetrated by self-perceived “victims”.

A double-edged sword, the popular reform impulse can help tear down unjust inequities. On the other hand, it can also give rise to hate and unfounded fear. “Beneath the sane economic demands of the Populists of 1890-1900”, writes historian Peter Viereck “seethed a mania of xenophobia, Jew-baiting, intellectual baiting, and thought-controlling lynch spirit.”⁹⁸

Political Dispossession

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Nugent, Walter T. K. *The tolerant Populists Kansas Populism and Nativism*. Chicago, Ill.: The @U of Chicago Press, 2013. Print. 8

What distinguished the Populist conscience was its firm belief that only a privileged few had been guilty of conspiracy. As Sheldon Hackney points out in *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*, most had seen themselves as members of a victimized and silent majority, not a “persecuted minority”.⁹⁹ Hackney points to a letter to the editor in the *Piedmont Inquirer* which declared that Populism was composed of “that class that makes a country rich, great, powerful, honorable and respectable, the people called the middle class...”.¹⁰⁰ Another letter in the *Troy Jeffersonian* declared that the “great mass of the people” were “among the farmers, laboring men, miners, and mechanics of the state.”¹⁰¹

Financial Anxieties

Some scholars have sought to minimize the economic concerns of the Populists in attempt to emphasize the relative importance of racism in the Populist conscience. Such an approach however, is misguided for two reasons. For one, the presence of both racial and economic unease need not be mutually exclusive--they frequently fed off one another. Economic worries often give rise to scapegoating, for which ethnic minorities are easy targets.

Second, such scholars ignore what were real and pressing fears for many Populist farmers. When discussing Populist economic concerns however, it is important to distinguish between economic anxiety and distress, the former being the fear of economic turmoil and the latter being the turmoil itself. Without doubt, many Gilded

⁹⁹ Hackney, 77

¹⁰⁰ *The Piedmont Inquirer* [Piedmont], 14 July 1894

¹⁰¹ *Troy Jeffersonian* [Troy], 17 August 1894

Age farmers had suffered serious economic distress. American tariff policy, for example, forced farmers to buy manufactured products at artificially high prices while selling their goods in unprotected foreign markets. A particularly nasty drought had struck the Great Plains from 1890 to 1896, which had devastated crop yields in states like Nebraska and Kansas. Unpaid loans and mortgages led to foreclosed homes and farms, forcing many to enter into tenant farming and sharecropping. Some had succumbed to a process of “primitive dis-accumulation” and never-ending downward mobility.¹⁰²

However, it was primarily economic anxiety, not distress that had driven agrarian and Populist unrest. From a rational-choice perspective, this reality is intuitive. After all, political organization requires precious time and money, resources largely absent to a foreclosed or downtrodden farmer. Those near or at the brink of serious economic distress however, would have stood the most to gain by “investing” in cooperative action to affect political change.

Empirical studies confirm this portrait of the anxious Gilded Age farmer. James Stock, for example, found a strong relationship between protest activity and level of indebtedness.¹⁰³ Though debt may appear like a sign of economic distress, it instead signals economic anxiety. After all, businesses and entrepreneurs incur debt to invest in new business ventures. They become anxious however, when they feel that they cannot successfully repay their loans.

¹⁰² Fraser, 49

¹⁰³ Stock, James H. "Real Estate Mortgages, Foreclosures, and Midwestern Agrarian Unrest, 1865–1920." *The Journal of Economic History* 44.01 (1984): 89-105. Web.

Other studies suggest that support for People's Party candidates was closely correlated to the frequency of mortgage farm foreclosures in a given region.¹⁰⁴ Though foreclosures signal economic distress, James Stock concludes that it was the threat of foreclosures—a source of economic anxiety--that drove agrarian discontent. As Stock's findings demonstrate, mortgage foreclosures were relatively rare, ranging from 2-5% across Southern and Midwestern states. Stock thus proposes a "fear of foreclosure" hypothesis: the ostensible threat of impending foreclosure, not the foreclosures themselves, had primarily driven unrest across farm counties. From this standpoint, the relative rate of foreclosures among neighbors would have been quite high. In a state with a modest annual foreclosure rate of 3%, the probability of one having at least one neighbor suffer from foreclosure would have been a staggering 75%. This reality would have frightened many farmers in a given community, suggesting that the threat of foreclosure was always imminent.

Data concerning farm income and productivity also confirms the presence of Populist anxiety. Average farm incomes grew over the last several decades of the Gilded Age, suggesting that most farmers were not truly distressed. However, agricultural productivity and income increased at a much slower rate relative to the national average, close to 50% less.¹⁰⁵ Such a reality could have stoked agrarian anxieties, suggesting that they could not "keep up" with their industrial counterparts.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Fogel, Robert, and Jack Rutner. "The Efficiency Effects of Federal Land Policy, 1850-1900: A Report of Some Provisional Findings." *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History*. Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1972. N. pag. Print.

The economic stature of the farmers had also predisposed them to anxiety. Farmers often lived at the mercy of erratic and unpredictable financial markets, intensifying the agrarians' sense of vulnerability and anxiety. Due to the globalization of agricultural markets, American farmers had become market price-takers and were subject to the volatility of frequent banking panics and the boom-and-bust cycle. Empirical research from several states suggests that agrarian unrest was strongly correlated with economic uncertainty, and price and income variability.¹⁰⁶

Common business practices also contributed to agrarian anxieties. Farmers were frequently hard-pressed for cash, meaning many were left at the mercy of banks and other creditors for capital expenditures. In fact, a staggering 90 percent of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi farmers lived on credit.¹⁰⁷ Railroads and banks charged farmers discriminatory rates for their services. Interest rates were often several points greater and freight rates four times higher in the Mid-West than in the East.¹⁰⁸ To the paranoid Populists, higher rates and financial disparities had primarily stemmed from monopolistic manipulation and rate-rigging.¹⁰⁹ Marion Butler for example, when warning of the dangers of trusts, writes that a "few great bankers and syndicates...can therefore regulate rates and make discrimination in favor of monopolies and trusts with which they are allied."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ McGuire, Robert A. "Economic Causes of Late Nineteenth Century Agrarian Unrest: New Evidence." *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1981): 835-52.

¹⁰⁷ Goodwyn, 15, 113

¹⁰⁸ Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*

¹⁰⁹ Eichengreen, Barry. "Mortgage Interest Rates in the Populist Era." *The American Economic Review* 74.5 (1984): 995-1015. Web.

¹¹⁰ Butler, Marion. 1900. Legislative Memo. Washington, D.C.

At the core of agrarian anxieties, sat monetary exasperation. Given its financial impact on agrarian life, the currency question occupied the Populist conscience to the greatest degree. In *The Populist Revolt*, John Hicks writes for example, that “During the campaign of 1892, the Populists had learned that of all the planks in their platform the silver plank had the widest appeal.”¹¹¹ The gold standard, which largely determined monetary policy, had strangled, indeed, “crucified” many farmers, as deflation and hard-money policy made it increasingly more difficult to pay back loans, leaving many drowning in debt.¹¹² Thus, many “were frequently plagued by social ostracism, loss of financial credit, and sometimes physical intimidation.”¹¹³ . One correspondent wrote to President Cleveland’s secretary in 1895: “Having been pretty well over the country since we last met, traveling...South and West. The people in that section are simply crazy on the money question; they cannot discuss it *rationally*.”¹¹⁴

Cultural Isolation

Gilded Age divisions not only stemmed from political and economic divides, but also from cultural rifts. The Northeast experienced rapid urbanization, a reality that heightened sectional divides and exacerbated agrarian discontent. Many Populists looked condescendingly upon urban centers, which had housed the haughty bankers and merchants that had been so responsible for the era’s excesses. As Hahn points out, “Drawing upon the elements of *rural* disaffection, Populism articulated a bitter

¹¹¹ Hicks, 301

¹¹² Bryan, William J. "Cross of Gold Speech."

¹¹³ Hackney, Sheldon, *Populism to progressivism in Alabama*. Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1969. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00252.0001.001>. 3

¹¹⁴ Hofstadter, Richard. *The paranoid style in American politics, and other essays*. New York: Vintage , 1967. Print. 241

critique of capitalist relations and values.”¹¹⁵ “It was inconceivable”, writes Hofstadter, “that the hardworking, Bible-reading citizenry should be inferior in moral insight to the cynical financiers of the Eastern cities.”¹¹⁶ Their cultural anxieties made appeals to Founding-era concerns. “It was the great merchant, not the farmer, cried Bryan” that had called for standing armies during colonial era.¹¹⁷

The rural standing of many farmers was also significant because it contributed to the Populist sense of social isolation. As James Turner points out, “the Populists tended to live out of the social and economic mainstream”—they were culturally isolated.¹¹⁸ Across all Southern states except Alabama for example, there was a strong negative correlation between the People’s Party vote and the percentage of population in towns over 2,500.¹¹⁹

This geographic isolation of the farmers had crucially shaped the Populist conscience. Hackney emphasizes the importance of social rootlessness to the their sense of dispossession:

“Populists were only tenuously connected to society by economic function, by personal relationships, by stable community membership, by political participation, or by psychological identification with the South's distinctive myths.... they were vulnerable to feelings of powerlessness...”¹²⁰

This rootlessness molded their anxieties and psychology in several ways. First, as Turner points out that “Their relative isolation gave Populists enough independence

¹¹⁵ Hahn, 287

¹¹⁶ Hofstadter, Richard. *The American Political Tradition*. New York: Knopf, 1973. Print. 188

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 189

¹¹⁸ Turner, James. "Understanding the Populists." *The Journal of American History* 67.2 (1980): 354-73. Web. 359

¹¹⁹ Turner, 358

¹²⁰ Hackney, 30

from the dominant political culture to allow the growth of an original politics and ideology.¹²¹ They could form distinct ideas apart from the mainstream. Second, their relative isolation helps explain the presence of paranoia and popularity of conspiracy theories throughout the Populist conscience. Many farmers were simply not exposed to ethnic or economic realities, which contributed to falsehoods and ungrounded myths. It is much easier to believe in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories for example, if one has never met a Jew.

¹²¹ Turner, 370

Part III: A Paranoid Style

An analysis of Populist rhetoric and style across newspapers, speeches, books, personal papers, and party materials, reveals a distinct mode of expression among Gilded Age reformers. When faced with daunting civic concerns, many were not just fearful, but *paranoid*--hyper-suspicious and persecutory toward enemies. Though their agrarian life had helped facilitate republican virtue, it predisposed many to hate and paranoia. A reflection of their Jeffersonian historical roots and social anxieties, Populist paranoia manifested itself in several ugly ways.

In his landmark 1964 essay, Richard Hofstadter traces a history and an outline of this "Paranoid Style in American Politics"¹²². Characterized by heated "exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy", it can afflict the political modes of expression of "more or less normal people".¹²³ From early anti-Masonic conspiracy theories to McCarthyism, and Populism, one can find a common paranoid thread throughout United States history. The term of course, is pejorative. However, it does not necessarily pass judgment on the truth or merit of individual fears or proposals. "Nothing really prevents a sound program or demand from being advocated in the paranoid style", writes Hofstadter.¹²⁴ Usage of the term is also not meant to suggest that the issues they raised were not of serious and pressing concern. Even the most critical of historians have acknowledged the enormous debt owed to the Populists for addressing pressing economic issues wrought by Gilded Age industrialism.¹²⁵

¹²² Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harpers Magazine* 6 Feb. 2017: n.pag. Print.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ See Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*

Rather, the term denotes a distinct style, method, and strategy of political discourse. Often, Populist writings and materials would address legitimate public policy concerns alongside fanciful conspiracy theories. Talks of oligarchs, money rings, “shylocks”, and manipulators characterized the Populist understanding of civic concerns. This style manifested itself in several ways because many were excessively wary of those across the American civic spectrum. Often, paranoid attitudes emerged from complex syntheses of cultural, economic, and political anxieties. While some of their fears were legitimate and well-founded, many of their theories were simply absurd and groundless. After all, a movement that is consistently paranoid is likely to be frequently wrong.

What most distinguished the Populist conscience was not just its belief in individual conspiracy theories, but its paranoid *conscience*. As Hofstadter aptly notes, “there is a great difference between locating conspiracies in history and saying that history is...a vast fabric of social explanation out of nothing but skeins of evil plots.”¹²⁶ From a civic standpoint, the Populists thus deserve enormous blame. Though responsible for shedding light on Gilded Age inequities, Populists often failed to address public policy issues in a rational manner. They frequently engaged in disturbing race-baiting and scapegoating.

Understanding this style is important for several reasons. First, it sheds lights on the historical roots of Populist anxieties. Their paranoid style, having emerged from Jeffersonian and Jacksonian republican roots, reflected a desperate effort to save a rural lifestyle that was most conducive to republican civic life. Like Jefferson had

¹²⁶ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 71

done during the Revolution, and Jackson throughout his administration, Populists had sought to wrestle political power from a privileged oligarchy. Indeed, Jefferson himself exhibited a “paranoid style” and engaged in “conspiracy mongering” throughout his political career.¹²⁷ Always fearful of the destruction of republican government, he “appears really to have believed, at one time, that the Federalists were conspiring to re-establish monarchy.”¹²⁸ In similar fashion, Andrew Jackson harbored a hyper-suspiciousness towards financial interests and the Bank of the United States throughout his presidential administration. “The Bank...is trying to kill me” he famously declared, “but I will kill it.”¹²⁹

To a large extent, the relationship between paranoia in general and Jeffersonian republicanism is a natural one. The American republican tradition is inherently fearful, always resisting crooked and aristocratic forces. Lance Banning writes in the *Jeffersonian Persuasion* that this tradition first grounded itself in opposition to corruption and privilege, “the ruin of classical republican ideals.”¹³⁰ “Early American founders”, writes Banning, “hoped that the rejection of hereditary privilege would make it possible to form new governments that would be fully suited to the people’s democratic character and to the preservation...of their special way of life.”¹³¹ On the one hand, anxious tendencies can fend off forces that are destructive to republican democracy. After all, it was anxiety and paranoia “above else”, writes Bernard

¹²⁷ Meacham, Jon. *Thomas Jefferson: the art of power*. New York: Random House, 2012. Print. xxviii

¹²⁸ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform*. New York, Vintage, 1955. 72

¹²⁹ “Andrew Jackson.” *The White House*, The United States Government, 25 Dec. 2014, www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/andrewjackson.

¹³⁰ Banning, Lance. *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology*. Ithaca : Cornell U press, 1978. Print. 82

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 84

Bailyn, that first propelled the American Revolution.¹³² On the other hand, it can manifest itself in hate and social stratification, which are toxic to liberal values and social harmony.

Second, it helps better understand Populist feelings of dispossession, anxieties, and their reactionary tendencies--the roots of their paranoid style. Because the agrarian activists, self-perceived victims, were “fending off threats to a still established way of life”, they developed groundless suspicions toward conspiring enemies.¹³³ Studying late 19th century paranoia can thus shed light on the political appeal of the Populist impulse and the demographic composition of its adherents. To many, the battle against the Gilded Age status quo was an uphill one as “goldbugs” and elites conspired to sideline the agrarian farmer. Thus, the “paranoid style” could “successfully leverage the passions and animosities” of a fuming silent majority.¹³⁴ That their political appeal may have stemmed directly from their use of overt and coded racist and paranoid language is a strong possibility worth assessing.

To a casual observer of the 19th century, the era’s inequalities and dilemmas may have seemed to some extent inevitable, products of powerful economic and political forces. To the Populists however, this was not so. The problems they faced and the forces that threatened their lifestyle were by no means inevitable. Rather than blaming decentralized forces, they often turned towards finger-pointing and scapegoating. This distinct understanding of Gilded Age inequities bred the Populist

¹³² *Ibid.* 95

¹³³ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, 3

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1

paranoid style and explains why many spoke the language of conspiracy. Some of their paranoia could be adequately explained by their economic or political anxieties alone. Other brands of it however, developed from multifaceted roots and reflected the diversity of Populist anxieties.

Procedural Paranoia

Across several facets of civic life, Populists feared the decay of fair and honorable political life. For one, many feared that public legislation had been crafted solely in favor of established interests. A *Louisiana Populist* article declared that there are those

“living in the east mostly a lot of wealthy men who, taken collectively, constitute what is known as the money power. By bribery and corrupt use of money, they gets laws passed that enable them to form monopolies and trusts to rob the people.”¹³⁵

They “blackmail corporations and maintain costly lobbies for the purchase of representatives”.¹³⁶ Many also consistently questioned the validity of political elections and believed in widespread voter fraud. *The People’s Party Paper* for instance, talked of “universal intimidation” and “bribery”.¹³⁷ After sweeping congressional Republican victories in 1894, which was seen by many as a loss for the Populist cause, several newspapers declared charges of voter fraud. An

¹³⁵ “Who Buys Votes” *The Louisiana Populist* [Natchitoches] 16 November 1894: n. pag. *The Louisiana Populist*. Web.

¹³⁶ Untitled Article *The Louisiana Populist* [Natchitoches] 23 November 1894: n. pag. *The Louisiana Populist*. Web.

¹³⁷ *People’s Party Paper* [Atlanta] n.d.: n. pag. *People’s Party Paper*. 1894. Web.

American Nonconformist article charges that the 1894 primaries had been rigged by ballot stuffing.¹³⁸ One article in the *Louisiana Populist* declared that “it must be stopped and those who are reaping the spoils of fraud through such methods had better take warning in time.”¹³⁹

Financial Paranoia

That the Populists attempted to eliminate monometallic currency and lessen agrarian financial distress through sound public-policy efforts is clear. These “Silverites” talked “Gold-bugs” like Grover Cleveland or William McKinley as the worst of heretics. An analysis of several party platforms reveal proposals to help better regulate the banking industry and monetary affairs. The 1896 Democratic Platform for instance, demanded that “all paper (money) which is made a legal tender for public and private debts...shall be issued by the government.”¹⁴⁰ The Omaha Platform famously called for the “unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the present legal ratio of 16:1.”¹⁴¹

Of course, a proper analysis of the Populist impulse includes much more than simply a glance at policy proposals. A comprehensive study of their rhetoric and posture—their style--reveals intense and disturbing paranoid trends. To many, it was a full scale battle of good versus evil, liberty versus despotism. It was an effort to defeat the “agencies of the money power” and the “domination of the gold ring”—

¹³⁸ “Louisiana Election Fraud” *American Nonconformist* [Indianapolis] 29 November 1894: n. page *American Nonconformist* Web.

¹³⁹ “In Alabama” *The Louisiana Populist* [Natchitoches] 30 November 1894: n. pag. *The Louisiana Populist*. Web.

¹⁴⁰ “Democratic Party Platforms: 1896 Democratic Party Platform - July 7, 1896.” *The American Presidency Project*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

¹⁴¹ “The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party.”

the “*evils* that now curse humanity”.¹⁴² To many, the gold standard seemed to only serve “the enrichment of the money-lending class at home and abroad”.¹⁴³

Politics and Money

The Populists focused on currency remedies to their problems to an unrealistic extent because to them, the monetary question was not simply an economic one. It was a civic one and defined the Gilded Age farmer’s central relation to American democracy. It was “paramount to all others at this time”, and the elimination of the single gold standard occupied a central role in the Populist conscience.¹⁴⁴ Their effort was a “conflict of the money powers battling for a gold oligarchy and the masses struggling for constitutional liberty.”¹⁴⁵ Its elimination was essential if other civic dilemmas were to be tackled. “When have restored the money of the Constitution”, declared Williams Jennings Bryan in his Cross of Gold Speech, “all other necessary reforms will be possible;...but until this is done there is no other reform that can be accomplished.”¹⁴⁶ “No Congress will ever be able to give the people relief and good government”, writes Marion Butler, because established interests “nominate candidates who belong to the British gold trust.”¹⁴⁷

Thus, many reformers believed that opposition to the gold standard, was consistent with, and even required by, the principles of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian

¹⁴² Butler, Marion. "Selected Speeches on the People's Party." Letter. 1896. MS. Winston, North Carolina.

¹⁴³ "Democratic Party Platforms: 1896 Democratic Party Platform." *Democratic Party Platforms: 1896 Democratic Party Platform*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Feb. 2017.

¹⁴⁴ *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] Oct. undated: n. pag. Print.

¹⁴⁵ "Untitled Article" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] Oct. 1893: n. pag. Print.

¹⁴⁶ Bryan, William J. "Cross of Gold Speech."

¹⁴⁷ Butler, Marion. "To The Members of the People's Party And To All Voters Who Are Opposed To The Single Gold Standard." Letter. Jan. 1896. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. Print.

democracy. It was the only way to defeat the “*aristocracy of Capital*”, borrowing language from 18th century Jeffersonian lexicon.¹⁴⁸ That “Mr. Jefferson believed that money was a National agent, and should be created by the National Government and for the use of the Nation” perhaps was reason enough for some Populists to oppose the gold standard.¹⁴⁹

Ever wary of financial interests, the Populist effort also looked to the example of Old Hickory, the great bank-buster. In his “Cross of Gold” speech, Bryan declared that “we need an Andrew Jackson to stand...against the encroachments of aggregated wealth” and “who destroyed the bank conspiracy and saved America”.¹⁵⁰ After all, Fraser writes, “Rural hostility to the money power was an entrenched tradition, its roots extending as far back as Jackson’s war against the Bank of the United States.”¹⁵¹

A Note on Cultural Paranoia

It is difficult to locate Populist paranoia that emerged from cultural anxieties alone. Some Populists, like Mary Elizabeth Lease, were active members in the Temperance Movement and were energetic cultural reformers. However, most of their cultural anxieties had been closely intertwined with other political and economic anxieties. That is not to suggest that their cultural anxieties were not energetic and far-reaching. When approached with pressing economic or political concerns, their xenophobia, racism, and sense of cultural dispossession stood clear.

¹⁴⁸ “Untitled Article” *People’s Party Paper* [Atlanta] Oct. 1893: n. pag. Print.

¹⁴⁹ “Untitled Article” *People’s Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

¹⁵⁰ Bryan, William J. “Cross of Gold Speech.”

¹⁵¹ Fraser 93

This reality suggest that it was economic anxieties that ultimately predisposed the Populists to race-baiting and nativist language. Their extraordinary fears of a Jewish “money power” for example best exemplify this reality.

Shylock Bankers and The Rothschild Syndicate

Perhaps the most disturbing and noteworthy trends of the Populist paranoid style was its frequent references to anti-Semitic imagery and conspirator language. Many agrarians were paranoid of urban Jewish bankers who had little respect for yeoman farmers. A reflection of their agrarian roots, Populist anti-Semitism thus grounded itself in economic and cultural prejudice. Because the “popular image of the Jew is related to the city in many ways”, notes Sociologist Arnold Rose, American anti-Semitism has often emerged from “the glorification of rural life”.¹⁵² Jews have often epitomized pompous city life and the unbridled financialization of America—they are the urban *par excellence*. Historian Hasia Diner emphasizes the close relationship between Populist agrarianism and anti-Semitic prejudices:

Some Populists believed that Jews made up a class of international financiers whose policies had ruined small family farms, they asserted, owned the banks and promoted the gold standard, the chief sources of their impoverishment. Agrarian radicalism posited the city as antithetical to American values, asserting that Jews were the essence of urban corruption.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Rose, Arnold M. “The Study of Man: Anti-Semitism's Root in City-Hatred.” *Commentary Magazine*, 1 Oct. 1948.

¹⁵³ Diner, Hasia. *The Jews of the United States*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2004. Print. 170

Of course, the Populists were hardly the only group to harbor anti-Semitic tendencies in the late 19th century. Historians have long debated whether they were more or less anti-Semitic than their contemporary political counterparts, a question that is certainly hard to answer definitively.¹⁵⁴ However, when understanding Gilded Age activism from the standpoint of political science, one need not measure Populist anti-Semitism in aggregate terms. Rather, one can ask whether their efforts at reform and economic anxieties stoked a paranoid racial prejudice in any significant way.

That the Populists did stoke these prejudices is clear. Given the widespread acceptance and popularity of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories among Populist reformers, many believed that greedy Jewish bankers had helped design a gold oligarchy and had cheated rural farmers of financial stability. “There is no doubt”, writes 19th century historian Louise Mayo, “that in their intense hatred for the ‘money power,’ some Populists accepted anti-Semitic stereotypes and identified

¹⁵⁴ Pollack, Norman. "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism." *The American Historical Review* 68.1 (1962): n. pag. Web. Pollack's conclusion that Populist anti-Semitism is a myth is dubious on several grounds. Primarily, Pollack succumbs to the fallacy of composition; he draws too strong of a conclusion based upon too little evidence. He concludes that Populist anti-Semitism was rare given the scarcity of explicit anti-Semitic statements amidst the Henry Lloyd, William Jennings Bryan, and Ignatius Donnelly papers. His analysis is insufficient for a few reasons. First, he fails to make mention of vitriolic anti-Semitic statements made by Marion Butler and Tom Watson, both of whom were highly influential figures in the Populist Era. Second, a strong conclusion concerning Populism surely must study prejudice outside the papers of leading figures. Also, Pollack selectively manipulates quotes to buttress his argument. He quotes Donnelly's assertion that the Jews have undergone “the most terrible ordeal of persecution the history of mankind bears any record of” as evidence of his compassion for Jews. To the contrary, Donnelly's account of persecution was *central* to his anti-Semitic conspiracy theories because it heightened the evolutionary selective process among Jews. In Donnelly's anti-Semitic novel, *Caesar's Column*, one of the characters explains that persecution left among the Jews “only the strong of body, the cunning of brain, the long headed, the persistent...and now the Christian world is paying, in tears and blood, for the sufferings inflicted by their bigoted and ignorant ancestors upon a noble race”. (See Hofstadter,) The novel serves as a good example as to why Pollack's analysis of personal papers is insufficient.

Jews with the evils of society”.¹⁵⁵ While anti-Semitism was widespread throughout American society, “it was chiefly Populist writers who expressed that identification of the Jew with the usurer and the ‘international gold ring’ which was the central theme of American anti-Semitism of the age”, writes Hofstadter.¹⁵⁶

Leading Populist figures embraced this rabid form of anti-Semitism. In a 19th century address, Mary Elizabeth Lease, “the best known orator of the Populist Era”, declared that “Redemption money and interest-bearing bonds are the curse of civilization” because “We are paying tribute to the Rothschilds of England, who are but the agent of the Jews.”¹⁵⁷ Grover Cleveland, she once declared, was an “agent of Jewish bankers.”¹⁵⁸ At the Second National Silver Convention of 1892, a speaker warned of politicians who represented “Wall Street, and the Jews of Europe.”¹⁵⁹ Ignatius Donnelly, one of the leading drafters of the Omaha Platform, often used the term “Shylock” to describe Jews as the “money-getters of the world.”¹⁶⁰ In his personal papers, People’s Party Chairman Marion Butler wrote that “a foreign gold syndicate of London Jews” and “cold-blooded Shylocks” had helped manipulate railroad prices.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Mayo, Louise A., *The Ambivalent Image: Nineteenth-Century America's Perception of the Jew*. London: Associated University Press, 1988. 61

¹⁵⁶ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 19

¹⁵⁷ Woestman, Kelly. “Mary Elizabeth Lease: Populist Reformer.” *Mary Elizabeth Lease: Populist Reformer* / *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 12 Sept. 2012, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/populism-and-agrarian-discontent/essays/mary-elizabeth-lease-populist-reformer. “Furor Over Mary Lease” *New York Times*, 11 Aug. 1896.”

¹⁵⁸ Lease, Mary, “The Problem of Civilization Solved”, 319-320

¹⁵⁹ *Proceedings of the Second National Convention*, Washington, 1892, 48

¹⁶⁰ Donnelly, Ignatius. *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*. Middletown: Wesleyan U Press, 2003. Print

¹⁶¹ Butler, Marion, “Trusts—The Causes That Produce Them And The Remedy”. 1900. Legislative Memo. Washington, D.C.

This type of anti-Semitic paranoia crept its way into influential think-pieces that drew upon the money question. Not just random anti-Semitic tracts, these pieces were influential reform pieces and best-sellers throughout the Populist Era. The novel *Tale of Two Nations*, written by the influential Populist thinker William “Coin” Harvey, features characters of racial stereotypes or disguised historical figures.¹⁶² It presents a London banker named Baron Rothe, a “Hebrew” (who represents the Rothschilds) who is determined to keep the United States on the gold standard.¹⁶³ He sends an assistant named Rosagner to persuade American politicians to support gold currency. Rosagner falls in love with a girl who is in love with a free-silver Nebraska congressman (who represents William Jennings Bryan). At the end of the play Rosagner is told that he is “very wise in his own way—the commercial way, inbred through generations.”¹⁶⁴

James B. Goode’s *Modern Banker*, a fictional account about late 19th century financial life is chock full of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. *Modern Banker* features characters who persistently warn against corrupted Jewish interests. The “Jew now finds himself the owner of more solid cash than all the rest of the world together” declares one character.¹⁶⁵ So too, they had been responsible for political corruption: “Not satisfied with all this, the Jews have organized, are buying up legislators, passing laws and creating conditions all favorable to themselves.”¹⁶⁶ In

¹⁶² “Coin” Harvey (1851–1936) - Encyclopedia of Arkansas." *"Coin" Harvey (1851–1936) - Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Feb. 2017. Harvey, William. *A Tale of Two Nations*. Chicago: Coin Publishing Company, 1894. Print.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 287

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 289

¹⁶⁵ Goode, James B. *The Modern Banker; a Story of His Rapid Rise and Dangerous Designs*. Chicago: n.p., 1896. Print. 128

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

fact, one of the characters blames Jewish interests for propping up the gold standard in the first place: “The Jews saw that by demonetizing silver, they would double the value of gold.”¹⁶⁷

Caeser’s Column, written by Ignatius Donnelly, the leading drafter of the Omaha Platform, features a dystopian oligarchy run by a Jewish banker named Jacob Isaacs. At one point in the novel, Isaacs declares that “the aristocracy of the world is now almost altogether of Hebrew origin.”¹⁶⁸ *Caeser’s Column* provides a comprehensive theory of Jewish evolution. Years of persecution only hardened the Jew, wrote Donnelly having risen “from dealers in old-clothes and peddlers of hats to merchants princes.”¹⁶⁹ “They said with Shylock: The villainy you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.”¹⁷⁰

Often, reform-minded periodicals fell prey to rabid anti-Semitism when they approached the money question. Cartoons depicted explicit anti-Semitism through cartoons, often displaying hook-nosed Jewish financiers. An 1896 cartoon for example, in the Populist newspaper *Sound Money*, shown below, depicts Uncle Sam crucified by hook-nosed bankers with a sign on top that reads “the U.S. is in the hands of Jews”. Judas is shown hung by a tree in the corner image. One cartoon in the free-silver magazine *New Road* depicts female Rothschild family members with large noses seducing Grover Cleveland.¹⁷¹

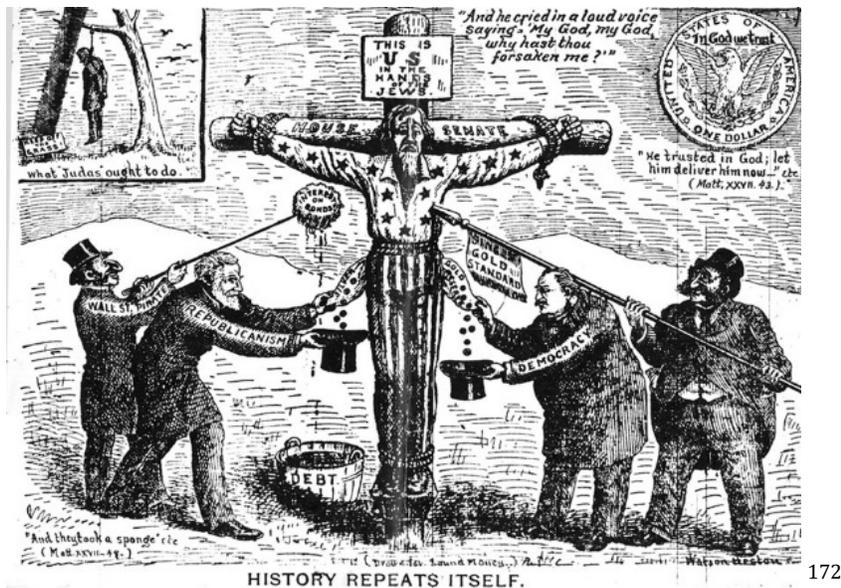
¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Donnelly 27

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid* 28

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid* 111

¹⁷¹ “To Be Decided At Chicago Next Month.” *New Road* 21 June 1896: n. pag. Vassar College. Web.



When studying the Populist Era, an observer of anti-Semitism must surely be vigilant. Publications and periodicals often omitted explicit prejudiced language towards Jews but made mention of familiar anti-Semitic symbols, suggesting possible coded efforts to appeal to anti-Semitic paranoia. Talks of “Shylock” bankers and an impending Rothschild takeover might have been rampant, but references to this Shakespearean foe or banking dynasty were often detached from explicit anti-Semitism.

Populist newspapers frequently made use of this type of rhetoric. One article in the *Progressive Farmer* notes that Shylock “exacts his pound of flesh” while another declared “that the great battle cry of the present campaign is down with Rothschild and the gold bugs.”¹⁷³ *The Advocate* would decry the “vaults of Shylock” and talked

¹⁷²“History Repeats Itself.” *Sound Money* [Massillon] 15 Apr. 1896: n. pag. *Sound Money*. Web.

¹⁷³“Don’t Be Fooled.” *The Progressive Farmer* [Winston] 24 Feb. 1891: n. pag. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. Web. “Cream of the Press.” *The Progressive Farmer* [Winston] 31 Mar. 1896: n. pag. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. Web.

of a “Morgan-Rothschild syndicate.”¹⁷⁴ The *Louisiana Populist* talked of “modern Shylocks” who want a “pound of flesh *and* blood”.¹⁷⁵ The selection of imagery like Shylock, a petty predator lender, and the Rothschilds, a priestly British family, suggests that this financial paranoia spanned across the class ladder.

It is rare however, to find among these newspapers explicit paranoid language concerning Jewish interests. Mentions of the Rothschilds or “The omnipresent symbol of Shylock” can hardly be taken in themselves as definitive evidence of conscious ideological anti-Semitism.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the usage of these symbols can still evince anti-Semitic prejudices and suggests possible coded attempts to appeal to anti-Semitic factions within the free-silver movement, given its prejudiced overtones. Without doubt, the use of such language triggered biased attitudes from some of its audience. Even if they did not, its imagery still signals a disturbing paranoid style.

Clever rhetorical strategies may have masked deeper prejudiced attitudes. Most prominently, William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech in the Chicago Coliseum evoked familiar anti-Semitic imagery. Generally remembered for its declaration that you “shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall crucify mankind upon a cross of gold”, the speech is remembered as the most legendary of the era.¹⁷⁷ The declaration’s selection of “crucifixion”

¹⁷⁴ “Money Monopoly.” *The Advocate* [Topeka] 15 May 1895: n. pag. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. Web. Curiously enough, the Topeka Advocate offered free copies of Harvey’s explicitly anti-Semitic tracts *Tale of Two Nations* and *Coin’s Financial School* to subscribers (see September 4th 1896 issue, page 1).

¹⁷⁵ “The Modern Shylock Wants a Pound of Flesh and Blood Also.” *The Louisiana Populist* [Natchitoches] 07 May 1897: n. pag. *The Louisiana Populist*. Web.

¹⁷⁶ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform*. New York, Vintage, 1955. 78

¹⁷⁷ Bryan, William J. “Cross of Gold Speech.”

imagery, given its anti-Semitic overtones of Judas and Jesus, is certainly one that deserves close scrutiny. Historian Leonard Dinnerstein argues that the cross image conjured a prejudiced reaction from its audience and suggested that “The same Jews who were responsible for the death of Jesus were responsible for the currency crisis”.¹⁷⁸ According to Dinnerstein, “The message was clear to the many Protestants who filled the ranks of the Populists”.¹⁷⁹

The speech could fit well within Arnold Rose’s and Hasia Diner’s model of agrarian antipathy toward urban Jews. Throughout the speech, Bryan transitions from attacking urban life, which was often epitomized by the Jew, to praising rural life. Dinnerstein writes that the speech effectively “appealed to rural Protestants who possessed a similar religious and cultural heritage with other Americans in the South and the West.”¹⁸⁰

Reminiscent of Jefferson’s appeals to a yeoman democracy, the speech argues that the laboring farmer is central to civic life. Rural professions, the Great Plains congressman declared using powerful language, were no less valuable or dignified than urban ones:

“The man who is employed for wages is as much a businessman as his employer. The attorney in a country town is as much a businessman as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis. The merchant at the crossroads store is as much a businessman as the merchant of New York. The farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, begins in the spring and toils

¹⁷⁸ Dinnerstein, Leonard. *Antisemitism in America*. New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1995. 49-50

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁰ Dinnerstein, 49-50

all summer, and by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of this country creates wealth, is as much a businessman as the man who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain.”¹⁸¹

Throughout the second half of the speech, Bryan, in agrarian fashion, transitions towards emphasizing the superiority of rural life over urban life. Cities, he argued, fundamentally depended on farm life:

“You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard. I tell you that the great cities rest upon these broad and fertile prairies. 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.”¹⁸²

It is shortly after this praise of rural life that Bryan offers his questionably anti-Semitic “Cross of Gold” declaration.

His 1896 speech was not the only time Bryan engaged with questionably prejudiced language. Throughout his congressional career, the Nebraska Congressman employed familiar anti-Semitic symbols. America, he asserted once asserted on the House floor, could not afford “to put ourselves in the hands of the Rothschilds” and demanded that the Treasury “shall be administered on behalf of the American people and not on behalf of the Rothschilds and other foreign

¹⁸¹ "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party."

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

bankers.”¹⁸³ In speeches, he often quoted sections from the Merchant of Venice to compare Shylock’s demands to that of contemporary financial interests.¹⁸⁴

Whether Bryan intentionally meant to do so in his speeches is difficult to prove definitively. True, studies of Bryan himself reveal little personal prejudice toward Jews.¹⁸⁵ The Nebraska Congressman often paid visits to synagogues, and emphasized that “greed and avarice...know neither race nor religion.”¹⁸⁶ However, Populist paranoia cannot be understood as simply the sum of personal biases, prejudices, and beliefs. Bryan himself may not have harbored anti-Semitic beliefs, but his speeches and rhetorical style certainly catered to them, either purposefully or inadvertently. That many members of his political base and audiences associated images of Shylock and Rothschilds with hook-nosed Jews, is without doubt. It is no wonder why his legendary 1896 campaign drew prominent support from anti-Semites like Coin Harvey and Hermann Ahlwardt, whose writings helped influence later Nazi thought.¹⁸⁷

International Paranoia: Suspicions of British Manipulation and London Whales

Populist paranoia was not just directed inward, but outward. This international paranoia manifested itself in several ways. Most prominently, there was widespread belief in an “*English and American Bankers’ Conspiracy*”, which grounded itself in

¹⁸³ Bryan, William J. “Speech of Hon. William J. Bryan of Nebraska.” Washington, D.C., House of Representatives.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Pollack, Norman. “The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism.”

¹⁸⁶ Bryan, William J. *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896*. Chicago: W.B. Conkey, 1897. Print.

¹⁸⁷ Digitale Bibliothek, n.d. Web. <<http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/0001/bsb00016233/images/index.html?seite=130>>.

political and financial anxieties.¹⁸⁸ From an economic standpoint, many believed that London speculators had manipulated American stock markets. From a political standpoint, Populists feared foreign “aristocratic” assaults on American democratic sovereignty. The Omaha platform for instance, declared that a “vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking over the world.”¹⁸⁹ An 1895 People’s Party manifesto wrote that a conspiracy was entered into “between the gold gamblers of Europe and America” that dealt “a blow to the prosperity of the people and the financial and commercial independence of the country”.¹⁹⁰

Many irrationally believed that British stockjobbers and financial interests were directly responsible for propping up the gold standard in America. An article in the *Progressive Farmer* declares that the United States was “ruled by England” and that Americans “were slaves of the British capitalists.”¹⁹¹ Marion Butler declared a war “against the infamous British gold conspirators as represented and supported by Sherman and Cleveland.”¹⁹² William Harvey’s *Coin’s Financial School* for example, a book so popular that Bryan claimed that nothing else had “produced so great an effect” in exposing economic inequities, warns of British manipulation.¹⁹³ It was

¹⁸⁸ "English and American Banker's Conspiracy." *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1894: n. pag. *People's Party Paper*. Web.

¹⁸⁹ "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party."

¹⁹⁰ Frank McVey, *The Populist Movement*, New York 1896. 201-202

¹⁹¹ "How England Taxes America." *The Progressive Farmer* [Winson] 10 Jan. 1899: n. pag. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. Web.

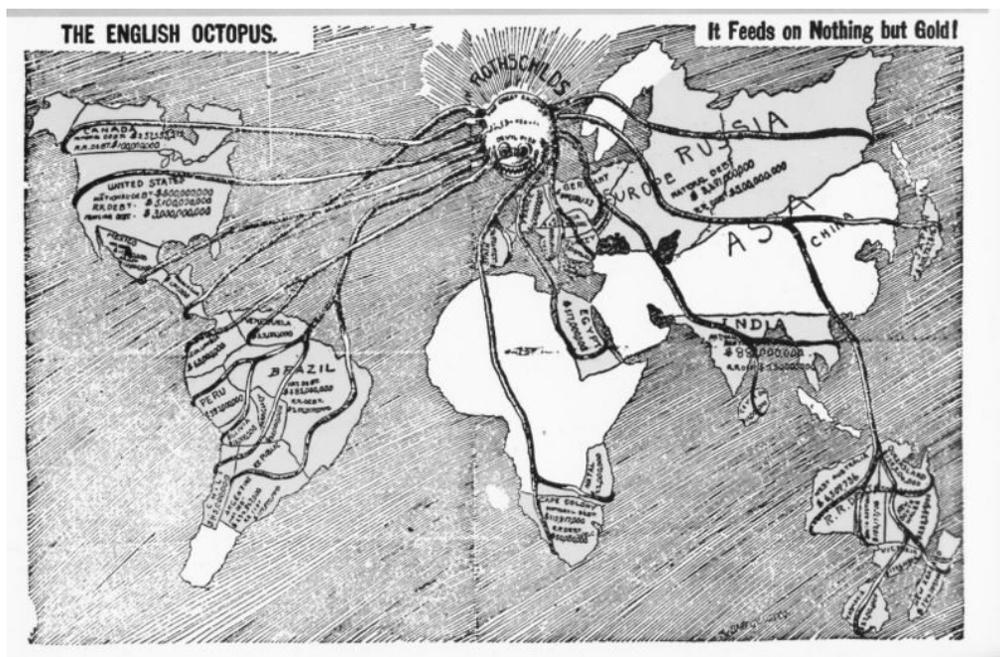
¹⁹² Butler, Marion. *Chariman Holton's Program*. 1896.

¹⁹³ Bryan, William J. *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896*. Chicago: W.B. Conkey, 1897. Print. 153

never in the American tradition to “let England dictate to us”, declares *Coin’s Financial School*.¹⁹⁴ The book ends with this proclamation:

“If it is claimed we must adopt for our money the metal England selects, and can have no independent choice in the matter, let us make the test and find out if it is true. It is not American to give up without trying. If it is true, let us attach England to the United States and blot her name out from among the nations of the earth. A war with England would be the most popular ever waged by man.”¹⁹⁵

It included cartoons that depicted an English Octopus extending its tentacles around the globe:



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¹⁹⁴ Harvey, William Hope. *Coin’s Financial School* Chicago: Coin Publishing Company, 1894. Print. 147

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 132

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 124

A reflection of their Jeffersonian political roots, Populist paranoia appealed to the legacy of the American Revolution and sounded the cry of war. Like Jefferson, whose disdain for English ways was well-known, many Populists feared the British manipulation of political processes and economic markets. Populist rhetoric often borrowed 18th century Jeffersonian language of an impending takeover of an “aristocracy”. Explicit references to the American Revolution for example, shed light on Populist efforts to toss off the yoke of British rule. “Will we calmly submit to surrender our liberties that our forefathers wrung from King George, because England would not allow us to coin the products of our silver mines?” asks a Topeka Advocate article.¹⁹⁷

Indeed, the Populists saw their reform efforts as a “second revolt of the colonies”, an attempt to re-assert financial and political independence.¹⁹⁸ “England, the head and front of gold monometallism,” writes an 1896 article, “will be obliged to surrender to America, and that surrender will be a great deal more galling than the surrender at Yorktown.”¹⁹⁹ The Populist conscience thus included appeals to Jefferson and other Founding Fathers, “who had fought for eight long years for their independence from British domination in this country” and “an intricate knowledge of her designs on this country.”²⁰⁰ They promptly set up a currency based on silver,

¹⁹⁷ Golden Idol" *Topeka Advocate* [Topeka] 17 July 1895: n. pag. *Chronicling America; Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. Web.

¹⁹⁸ Weaver, 6

¹⁹⁹ *Let America Compel England*. Aug. 1896. San Francisco .

²⁰⁰Harvey, *Coin's Financial School*,6-7

“among the first things they did.”²⁰¹ To many, bimetallism, not the gold standard, had long been the American standard; some called it “the dollar of our daddies”.²⁰²

Pauper Labor and “Dumping”

Another stream of international paranoia dominated the Populist conscience—the fear of pauper immigrants. This variation of paranoia incorporated both cultural and economic concerns. Specifically, many worried that aliens would rob American workers of their hard-earned jobs and wages. Take for example, particularly xenophobic language in the Omaha Platform, which attacked increasing levels of Gilded Age immigration:

“Resolved, That we condemn the fallacy of protecting American labor under the present system, which opens our ports to the pauper and criminal classes of the world and crowds out our wage-earners...and demand the further restriction of undesirable emigration”.²⁰³

What disturbed many then, was not just the presence of outsiders, but outsiders who had stolen *American* jobs, many of whom were deliberately “dumped” by European nations. To many, America had become “the convenient corner on which Europe dumps all her refuse—paupers, criminals, Anarchists, her surplus and dangerous population of all kinds.”²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Harvey, *Coin's Financial School*, 7

²⁰² Hofstadter, Richard. *The paranoid style in American politics, and other essays*. 258

²⁰³ "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party."

²⁰⁴ "The Dumping Ground of Nations" *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] Oct. undated: n. pag. Print.

Often, Populists blamed specific immigrant groups for their economic problems, like the Chinese, who were “moral and social lepers” to many.²⁰⁵ Because Chinese farming techniques had threatened the success of white Populist farmers, many agrarians, called for the purge of “Asiatic labor”.²⁰⁶

“Even Paranoid People Have Real Enemies.”²⁰⁷

Without question, some of the paranoid attitudes of the Populists were not baseless. After all, as Hofstadter points out, conspiracy theories are often widely accepted because they contain some level of truth.²⁰⁸ Gilded Age financial and political corruption was rampant and widespread, a historical reality that is beyond dispute. Thus, one must acknowledge that some Populist nightmares of economic and political conspiracy were not only legitimate, but ever-real. Robber barons like Jay Gould manipulated stock markets and traded on insider information. Railroad magnates like Collis Huntington of the “Big Four” eagerly bribed politicians to suit their business interests. In the 1888 Presidential election, twelve thousand more votes were counted than there were *eligible* voters in West Virginia.²⁰⁹ Samuel DeCanio convincingly documented that conspired bribery and corruption helped ensure passage of the Coinage Act of 1873, which to many Populists was “The greatest conspiracy against the masses of this country” and was passed “without knowledge of the people”. DeCanio demonstrates for example, that the President of

²⁰⁵ *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] Oct. 1893: n. pag. Print

²⁰⁶ Postel, 184

²⁰⁷ The quote is a variation of Henry Kissinger's declaration that “even a paranoid has real enemies” when describing Richard Nixon's enemies

²⁰⁸ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 71

²⁰⁹ G., Del Beccaro Thomas. *The divided era: how we got here and the keys to America's reconciliation*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2015. Print.

the Bank of California secretly bribed Treasury Department officials to curry favor for the passage of the law.

It would be wrong however, to condone all Populist types of paranoia just because some were legitimate. DeCanio for example, succumbs to the logical fallacy of composition; he goes so far as to defend the Populists against all charges of irrational conspiracy-mongering based on evidence for one of their theories. If it is true that a portion of their paranoid beliefs grounded themselves in reality, then it is equally true that a large number of these conspiracy theories. Their claims of a “Rothschild syndicate” or “Shylock conspiracy” for example, were virtually baseless.

Even some of their less outlandish claims found minimal justification. Little empirical data for example, is available to support Populist paranoid claims of persistent financial and industrial rate-rigging.²¹⁰ Interest rates were higher in Mid-West not because of monopolistic manipulation, but because banks had to compensate for greater risk factors like the potential for drought and the financial insecurity of farmers. Railroads employed “Ramsey pricing” models which charged higher prices in the less competitive South and Mid-West so as to better compete in the more developed and crowded Northeast.

On the most fundamental level, the Populist concern that the death of robust agrarian life was orchestrated by conspiring elites was largely unfounded. Intense economic forces, stemming from globalization and industrialization, paved a new commercial landscape, which left little room for the independent “yeoman farmer”.

²¹⁰ Bogue, Allan G. *Money at interest: the farm mortgage on the middle border*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1969. Print.

The high financial risk associated with agrarian life was most responsible for the decay of the Populist rural lifestyle. John Maynard Keynes once aptly noted that “the high rates of interest from mortgages on land, often exceeding the probable net yield from cultivating the land, have been a familiar feature of many agricultural economies.”²¹¹ Profits simply could not keep pace with the increased costs of agrarian commercial life, which ultimately spelled its demise in American civic life.

²¹¹ Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. N.p.: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1936. Print. 241

Conclusion

The agrarian revolt of the 1890s represented the greatest expression of popular discontent ever in United States history. Having effectively channeled Gilded Age anxieties, the Populist impulse pervaded throughout all corners of American civic life. It gave rise to thousands of new newspapers that touted the anti-elitist posture. It produced the most successful third party ever in American political, the “People’s Party”. It inspired reform-minded writers who wrote the era’s best selling novels. It gave rise to a generation of political leadership that encouraged the masses to defend honest republican governance.

More than a century after its rise and decline however, political scientists and historians still debate its origins and basic identity. However, despite all of the disagreement, several historical and political realities stand clear. Strongly rooted in the Jeffersonian tradition, the Populist impulse harbored rich and deep American historical origins. Fueled by complex economic, political, and cultural anxieties, it produced a widespread conviction of “victimhood” among Gilded Age agrarians. While these anxieties helped facilitate meaningful reform, they also gave rise to a disturbing and divisive paranoid style. Today, amidst our own modern Gilded Age, we have witnessed spectacular displays of popular will, a reality that begs a comparison between the populism of then and now.

The Rise of Trump

The modern populist surge came to a peak with the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016, which shocked virtually all across the world. In the United States, many were

horrified by the rise of an ostensible demagogue while others cheered the choice of a political outsider that could reform Washington. His campaign was perhaps the most bizarre of any in American history, having shirked usual precedent and tradition. What stood out most about Trump's surge and campaign however, was the candidate's distinct rhetorical style. A reflection of his supporters' anxieties, Trump effectively embraced a paranoid style of conspiracy theories and scapegoating, like the Gilded Age Populists had a century earlier.

Prime facie however, it might seem like the surges of the Populists and Trump share little resemblance to one another, a reality that is to a certain extent true. Politically, the Populists and the Trump surge are said to have occupied polar ends of the political spectrum. It has become common to speak of the Populists as "left-wing" insurgents that embraced sweeping national programs and helped give rise to Progressive and New Deal ideology. Trump and his largely Republican base on the other hand, are commonly understood as "right-wing" and "reactionary".

Their shared rhetorical styles aside, the Trump surge differed in other key respects from the Populist revolt of the late 19th century. The Gilded Age reformers seized on unique agrarian worries—it was a revolt by and for the farmer. Trump on other hand, a real-estate magnate that probably would have been reviled by many Populists, drew upon distinct anxieties of the 21st century. Today, there is little, if any room for active agrarian political life, let alone much space for a "yeoman democracy".

A close comparison of Trump's surge and the Populist revolt however, reveal stark similarities between the two movements. From a historical standpoint, both

have strong Jeffersonian underpinnings and their paranoid attitudes ultimately stemmed from economic, political, and cultural anxieties. Demographically, a glance at 1896 and 2016 electoral maps reveal that Trump, like the Populists, found overwhelmingly strong support in the South and Mid-West.

While an understanding of Populism will help better understand Trump's surge, it is indeed important to understand the idiosyncrasies of each movement. Just as it is important to avoid projecting one's understanding of contemporary circumstances to an analysis of Populism, one should assure that one's understanding of the late 19th century not wholly color an analysis of Trump.

Jeffersonian Roots?

Today, talks of Jefferson and his legacy are less apparent and frequent than they had been during the Populist Era, which began only a century after the American Revolution. Nevertheless, one can locate clear traces of the Jeffersonian legacy throughout Trump's rhetoric and posture. In many ways, Trump's surge could find meaningful precedent throughout the history American populism.

Ultimately, the New York businessman, who had little political experience when running for office, depicted himself as a Washington outsider, a long-standing practice in American popular politics. He claimed he was a reformer that could curb corruption and "drain the swamp", proposals that surely would have been endorsed by our third president. Trump's claim at this mantle of populism was awkward and disingenuous to many, given his wealthy background and massive net worth. In this respect however, Trump was no different than Thomas Jefferson or Andrew

Jackson, both of whom came from privileged backgrounds before entering offices. Throughout his campaign, he persistently argued that he could best reform the system because he knew its imperfections and corruptions so well.

If Jefferson had advocated for the yeoman farmer, then Trump had supported the American worker, whose jobs were being exported and prospects hurt by greedy oligarchs. Reminiscent of Jackson's charges of a "corrupt bargain" in the election of 1824, Trump has long argued that the American political system was "rigged".

Trump was also certainly not the first president to be labeled a "demagogue". Jefferson was considered a "violent democrat, and "vulgar demagogue" by many.²¹² In the Virginia state legislature, fellow lawmakers charged that Jefferson was "an incendiary, a stirrer up of strike", and responsible for "arraying the poor against the rich, for base political purposes."²¹³

Several of Trump eccentric behaviors echo those of earlier populist presidents and movements. His attacks of and postures toward the media, for example, evoke memories of the Populist disdain towards established media interests. While in office, Jefferson himself abhorred the media and attempted to censor them. "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper", he once remarked—it was all fake news.²¹⁴ Almost two centuries before Trump had selected former Breitbart editor Steve Bannon as an advisor, President Jackson appointed influential newspaper editor Francis Preston Blair, to his kitchen cabinet. Trump's selection,

²¹² Smith, Margaret Bayard. "Extract about Thomas Jefferson." Letter. Dec. 1800. *The First Forty Years of Washington Society, Portrayed by the Family Letters of Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Monticello*. Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Web.

²¹³ *People's Party Paper* [Atlanta] 1893: n. pag. Print.

²¹⁴ Jefferson, Thomas. "Extracts from Thomas Jefferson to John Norvell." Letter to John Norvell. 11 June 1807. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Monticello*. Web. 15 Mar. 2017.

similar to Jackson's, was intended to help the president better understand and navigate established media interests.

Like the Gilded Age Populists, his political rhetoric harbored complex paradoxes and intricacies. While his warnings of corruption and attacks on Washington appeared Jeffersonian, Trump was, and still is no small government conservative. He has long advocated for ambitious federal projects like the construction of a wall along the Mexican border and increased spending for infrastructure, programs that are fashioned in Hamiltonian-style. A reflection of his pragmatism, Trump has long shirked at principled devotions to a limited set of governmental methods, much like the Populists. In fact, one of his primary appeals to voters during the election seasons was that he was a successful businessman who "could get things done". Finally, both Trump and the Populists were forward-looking and backward-looking. They had spoken of reforming a broken system, while looking backward for inspiration.

A Reformer: "Draining the Swamp"

Throughout his 2016 campaign, Trump attacked an outdated establishment that catered to special interests and big money—"The system is rigged", he would often declare. Though his policy proposals were often incomprehensible, the New York businessman brought serious economic concerns, like the effects of trade deals, front and center to the public arena. He talked of tax, trade, and healthcare reform and demanded a more accountable Washington. He lambasted the influence of money in politics and spoke of a political class "captured" by special interests. His

campaign garnered little support from large donors, and most of his funds originated from contributions of under \$200.

Ultimately, Trump does deserve serious credit for effectively shedding light on the inequities and dilemmas of our own Gilded Age. He exposed a whole swath of an American population that had felt disaffected and voiceless for several decades. Nevertheless, he deserves even more blame for exacerbating existing divides and anxieties, rather than mitigating them.

A Reactionary: Trump's Manufacturing Mythology

“Well my daddy come on the Ohio works, when he come home from World War Two, now the yard's just scrap and rubble, he said ‘them big boys did what Hitler couldn't do’”—Youngstown (1995), Bruce Springsteen

Trump, a reactionary, persistently promised that his reforms would make America “Great Again”. It was unclear to many however, what time period he was referring to or what exactly it was that made America “Great”. If the Populists had believed in an “agrarian myth”, where rural life was once vibrant and rich in the early 19th century, then Trump adhered to a “manufacturing myth”, where post-War American industrialism was once internationally dominant and could offer middle class Americans steady jobs of integrity and decent pay. His campaign frequently paid visits to once booming but hollowed-out industrial towns like Youngstown, Ohio and Scranton, Pennsylvania, drawing massive crowds of anxious Rust-Belt Americans.

Others however, looked even more cynically upon his “Great Again” declarations. Many believed that the slogan called for a return to an era where white-America was

once dominant. Throughout the election cycle, charges were made that Trump had catered to racial paranoid tendencies. Such concerns were certainly not without merit. He questioned the motives of an Indiana-born judge simply because he had Mexican ancestry and initially refused to criticize white supremacists, like David Duke, that endorsed him. Indeed, Trump's recent political career was long grounded in racial paranoia, having drawn national attention in 2011 for his "birther" comments, challenging Barack Obama's native-born claims.

Like William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" declaration, it is difficult to tell whether Trumps' "Great Again" assertions (and a large number of his other assertions for that matter) were deliberate attempts to appeal to racist and sexist attitudes. Similarly, it is hard to determine whether Trump harbors significant personal racial bias. Without doubt however, Trump, either purposefully or inadvertently, catered to racial paranoid tendencies. Many members of his audiences and political base, like Richard Spencer and members of the "Alt-Right", associated his claims "greatness" with racial homogeneity and intolerance.

The Roots of Trump Paranoia

Several theories have competed to explain Trump's rise. Some have argued that Trump represented a backlash against globalizing forces that have left so many anxious Americans behind. Others however, discounting economic concerns, suggested that his message was nothing less than ethnic demagoguery and race-baiting. It would be wrong though, to point to any single factor--"race", "culture", or "economics"--to best explain Trump's surge, just as it was wrong to do so with the

Populists. Its roots were complex and multifaceted, and Trump's paranoid style catered to a diverse array of anxieties and worries.

From an economic standpoint, an analysis of demographic data reveals that most were Trump voters were not necessarily financially *distressed* but *anxious*, like the agrarians of the 1890s. Trump voters were not on average any less wealthy than Clinton voters, nor were they any poorer than the supporters of Trump's counterparts during the Republican primaries.²¹⁵ Several empirical studies however, demonstrate that they were much more pessimistic and anxious about this country's future than was the average citizen. A Gallup study, having conducted surveys of voters, found that the more economically anxious a household, the more likely it was to harbor favorable opinions of Trump.²¹⁶ During the primary season, Trump supporters, though wealthier than the average Republican, were more than twice as likely to agree that "the future of the next generation of Americans will be worse" as were Clinton voters. Increased Trump support for example, was correlated with lower credit scores and increased subprime mortgages across counties.²¹⁷

From a political standpoint, Trump appealed to disaffected Americans that had felt dispossessed and voiceless. Having often spoken of a "silent majority", he claimed to be speak in favor of those Americans wounded by economic

²¹⁵ Rothwell, Jonathon. *Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump*. Rep. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump*. Gallup. Web. 15 Aug. 2016.

²¹⁶ Gallup, Inc. "Financial Insecurity Higher for Those Who Favor Trump." *Gallup.com*. N.p., 10 Oct. 2016. Web. 17 Mar. 2017.

²¹⁷ Casselman, Ben. "Stop Saying Trump's Win Had Nothing To Do With Economics." *FiveThirtyEight*. FiveThirtyEight, 09 Jan. 2017. Web. 21 Mar. 2017. Web.

globalization, a Washington elite, and crony capitalists. His blunt and simple speaking style appealed to many Americans, because “he spoke like them”.

Culturally, many rural Americans, most of whom supported Trump in the election, had become increasingly frustrated with urban elites, what political scientist Katherine Cramer called “the politics of resentment”. In her 2016 book *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Cramer, using ethnographic techniques and interviews, argues that scholars have long underestimated the force and breadth of rural cultural discontent. Central to Cramer’s argument is the resentment felt by rural “have-nots” who feel that increased centralization has only yielded benefits for the urban “haves”.²¹⁸ Though her 2016 work was focused on Wisconsin voters, Cramer has more recently argued that the same forces of resentment helped propel Trump’s nationwide victory.

Beside geographic isolation, “Racial isolation”, or living in communities with comparatively little racial diversity, was strongly predictive of support for Trump.²¹⁹ Jonathon Rothwell found that zip codes with a disproportionately high share of white residents were more likely to view Trump favorably.²²⁰ He writes:

“Limited interactions with racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and college graduates may contribute to prejudicial stereotypes, political and

²¹⁸ Cramer, Katherine J.. *The politics of resentment: rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2016. Print.

²¹⁹ "Subtract and divide." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 22 Oct. 2016. Web. 24 Mar. 2017.

²²⁰ Rothwell

cultural misunderstandings, and a general fear of rejection and not-
belonging".²²¹

Trump's Paranoid Style

During his presidential campaign and administration, Trump's paranoid tendencies spanned across an array of public policy issues and reflected a breadth of anxieties. His campaign commercials attacking the financial industry for example, exclusively featured Jewish bankers, which may have reflected both economic and cultural anxieties. He even questioned the validity and integrity of an election that he won. Barack Obama, Trump recently claimed without any evidence, had wiretapped his campaign phones.

His paranoia was also directed outward. Unlike the Populists, Trump did not energetically tout the revolutionary American spirit and today of course, Great Britain is no longer the world power it once was. It poses no threat to American independence. Whereas late 19th century America was an industrializing country insecure of its economic and political sovereignty, the America of today is the world's foremost superpower.

Thus, in contrast to the Populists, Trump's international paranoia instead focused not on American independence, but American *hegemony*. His paranoia frequently took aim at China, which has successfully challenged the U.S. ability to dominate global economic and political affairs. The Asian superpower, he declared, was

²²¹ *Ibid.*

ripping us off on trade, hacking our computers, and conjuring theories of global warming to undermine American manufacturing.

Reminiscent of Populist charges that Europe had been “dumping” “paupers” on America shores, Trump proclaimed in his candidacy announcement that Mexico had deliberately sent their “worst” to the United States. Both then and now, these claims grounded themselves in cultural and economic paranoia, but without regard to reality.

The End of the Modern Gilded Age?

The Populist impulse coincided with the culmination of the Gilded Age, as reformers effectively shed light on the era’s excesses and inequities. It was the ultimate expression of the era’s anxieties and widespread discontent. A product of modern Gilded Age anxieties, the Trump surge has transformed American civic life and politics for years to come. Whether Trump’s victory signals the end of the modern Gilded Age however, is a question that cannot yet be answered.

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