RICE UNIVERSITY

THE IDEOLOGY OF TEXAS POPULISM,
1886-1894

by

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Abstract

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The relationship of Populism and ideology has been the subject of a great deal of recent historical scholarship. Historians have employed a number of concepts to define ideology in their studies, but they have failed to agree on a mutually acceptable definition of the term. As a result, arguments of substance have often degenerated into arguments over semantics. Ideological issues have been obscured by disagreements over the meaning of such terms as oratory, values, rhetoric, programs, etc. The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to propose a definition of ideology for use in historical analysis; and second, to apply this concept to a particular historical situation.

The ideology of Texas Populism functioned as a leading element in the reform impulse that dominated Texas politics in the early 1890's. The emotional language of Populist oratory provided an effective vehicle for agrarian discontent. The ideology of the movement was not simply the irrational response of reactionary farmers to changing economic conditions. The genuine economic problems of the farmers were coupled with a growing sense of crisis about the stability of agrarian values. The convergence of these factors produced a reformist view of reality.

The marginal farmer in Texas was the focus of the most severe economic pressures of the 1890's, and he experienced the most acute sense of isolation from a rapidly developing urban-industrial environ-
ment. It was among the low-income, white Protestant farmers that Texas Populism sought its political base. The rhetoric of Populism emphasized the cleavages that set the farmer apart from society and reinforced the cultural values of the agrarian community. The evangelistic technique of the Populist orator called the farmer to participate in a holy crusade against the forces of economic and political conspiracy. The orator employed the symbols of agrarian superiority, religious virtue, and loyalty to the South to create a cohesive political movement among farmers.

The program of the Texas Populists helped to define the issues of reform politics in the 1890's. The farmers' proposals functioned as an educator of reform principles and as a source of pressure on an entrenched Democratic Party. The goal of Populist ideology was neither an idyllic past nor a quasi-socialist future. Populists asked for the preservation of what they understood to be equality of economic opportunity. If Populism in Texas contained the seeds of sour illiberalism, as some have suggested, it also contained the seeds of a continuing reform impulse.
Preface

The relationship of Populism and ideology has been the subject of a great deal of recent historical scholarship. Historians have employed a number of concepts to define ideology in their studies, but they have failed to agree on a mutually acceptable definition of the term. As a result, arguments of substance have often degenerated into arguments over semantics. Ideological issues have been obscured by disagreements over the meaning of such terms as oratory, values, rhetoric, programs, etc.

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to propose a definition of ideology for use in historical analysis; and second, to apply this concept to a particular historical situation. The first chapter reviews the historical uses of the concept of ideology, outlines the current scholarly debate over Populist ideology, and suggests a definition of the ideological process. The remaining chapters are an attempt to apply this definition of ideology to the problem of Texas Populism as a test case for the theory.
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CHAPTER ONE

Ideology: The Mirror of Reality

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. (II Corinthians 4:18)

The historian, it may be argued, should confine his investigation to concrete events in the past. His task is to reconstruct past fact on the basis of objective evidence. But the objective circumstances of the past alone, tell us little about the human condition. The world we live in is set in motion only in part by objective factors. Man's perception of reality is as important as economic and social factors in shaping his response to the world. The relationship of thought and action cannot be evaluated in a meaningful way through the application of concepts that did not exist in the historical setting. The historian should employ subsequent analytical ideas in his evaluation of an ideology. Later intellectual developments, within the range of specific problems dealt with by that ideology, belong to the period in which they appear. The historian should be concerned with the interaction of ideas and activity within the perceptual framework that prevailed in the given period. He must penetrate the inside of events to discover their meaning. "For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it."1 To understand the past, the his-

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torian must examine the language of its spokesmen in an attempt to uncover the meaning conveyed. He must learn to isolate from the rhetoric of an age its unifying values and the myths that provided social cohesion.

Alfred North Whitehead suggests that the concepts destined to become the unifying values of a society first appear as unarticulated forces. "Human life is driven forward by its dim apprehension of notions too general for its existing language. Such ideas cannot be grasped singly, one by one in isolation. They require that mankind advance in its apprehension of the general nature of things, so as to conceive systems of ideas elucidating each other." Any attempt to isolate these driving forces that defy specific verbal formulation in a given period may seem to be a wasted effort, but it is in these forces that ideology receives its dynamic quality. The ideological systems that order our lives were once part of a universe of vague symbols operating outside the limits of formal thought. It is the task of the historical imagination to penetrate the realm of these forces in search of the roots of formal ideologies. The activity and rhetoric of an age must be connected to the dynamic forces of myth and symbol, as well as to the objective conditions of life.

I. The Historical Career of Ideology

The word "ideology" means simply the science of ideas, but its uses in history have added a variety of connotations. Destutt de

Tracy coined the term in his *Élements d'ideologie* in 1801. As a leader of a school of thinkers known as the "ideologues" under the Napoleonic regime, Tracy defined ideology as the science of determining the origin of ideas. The ideologues rejected metaphysics and looked to anthropology, psychology and zoology as the basis of human thought. As the forerunners of positivism, they sought to define the natural science of the mind; reason was to reveal an objective picture of human nature which would form the basis of morality and civic virtue.\(^3\)

The ideologues cooperated with Napoleon, but their thought formed an incipient criticism of existing cultural norms. Napoleon formulated the modern conception of ideology when he contemptuously labeled the group "ideologists", suggesting that their ideas were unrealistic in practice. The political arena was the realm of reality, and ideology was futile when it came to practical politics. "Cannon killed feudalism," he declared. "Ink will kill modern society.\(^4\)

Faith in the power of ideas did not collapse under Napoleon's pragmatic attack. Hegel retained confidence in the power of reason despite his disillusionment with the results of the French Revolution. The mind had the potential rationality to bring order out of chaos, but it was a special form of rationality. Individuals might act irrationally, but they participated in the reason inherent in history.


The problem of ideology for Hegel was one of false consciousness; the individual was simply a tool of history. His particular role was concealed from him, and became apparent only in retrospect. The "world historical individual" in Hegel's system contributed action rather than insight: "Such individuals had no consciousness of the general Idea they were unfolding." The ultimate responsibility for action rested on impersonal, trans-personal, or super-personal forces whose evolution was identical with the process of history.5

Marx responded to Hegel initially by rejecting a dialectic that swallowed up individuals. He escaped the dialectic of history by predicting the end of history itself. During the remaining period of "prehistory", however, theory was without critical function and consciousness was a simple function of existing institutions. "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness."6

Consciousness was ideological in history only because it was powerless to shape environment, but, when the revolution brings an end to history, consciousness will become the tool of rationality. "The mature consciousness which in retrospect comprehends the necessity of this lengthy process of 'prehistory' will not be an ideological one:


it will be shared by all men, and will mark mankind's understanding
of its own past." But for the period of history before the revolution,
Marx effected a marriage of an individual's perception and his class
position. Thinking no longer gave access to universal truth, and all
thinking was ideological, i.e. the product of false consciousness.

The false consciousness formula of Marx was used as a weapon
to "unmask" one's political foes in the nineteenth century. The attacker
considered his own position to be absolute while labeling his opponent's
ideas as the mere function of their social and economic origin. But
this one-sided ideological criticism contained the logic of its own
destruction. Eventually, all positions would be labeled "ideological."
The reappearance of romantic criticism in the late nineteenth century
hastened the demise of the false consciousness method. The unmasking
of adversaries became a devastating tool in the hands of a thinker
like Friedrich Nietzsche. His questioning of the roots of all systems
of thought threatened the position of meaning itself. If man lives only
by illusions, then history ceases to have meaning. "Thus the whole
history of a thing, an organ, a custom, becomes a continuous chain of
reinterpretations and rearrangements, which need not be causally connect-
ed among themselves which may simply follow one another...."While forms
are fluid, their 'meaning' is even more so." Human thought was less
than ideological, it was simply irrational. The exposure of the irra-
tional by thinkers like Nietzsche and Freud led to a search for new
forces in human behavior.

7 Liethelm, op. cit., p. 21.
8 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing
Georges Sorel's Reflections on Violence added a new dimension to the concept of ideology. "Myth" was something more than an idea; it was the driving force behind societies. It was not subject to rational argument, because it found its expression in action. "A myth cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group, being an expression of these convictions in the language of movement...." The myth is important only in its totality; its details are unimportant. Ideology in Sorel's thought avoids the stigma of being mere theory by its association with myth. Ideology represents rational formulation with its foundations in myth.

At the same time that the irrational side of ideology was being exposed, new theories in the social sciences were being applied to the problem. Max Weber approached the problem of ideology by divorcing it from philosophy, and reinterpreting it in the light of sociology. Ideology was no longer the problem of conscious or unconscious distortion of reality for special group interests. It was now seen as an intellectual reflex of determinate social processes. Relativism replaced the hope of ultimate rationality. "There is no way of transcending this situation, for the growth of rationality leads only to an awareness that it is not possible to ground value judgements in the universally accepted doctrine of human nature." Ideology became a fixed point

10 Lichtheim, op. cit., p. 32.
in every system that could not be altered or avoided. Weber applied Marxian false consciousness to Marxism itself and produced ideological relativism: Marx no longer provided scientific perception. After Weber's work, all points of view, including one's own, had to be subjected to ideological analysis.

Karl Mannheim developed Weber's insights into a formal system which he called the sociology of knowledge. Ideology was the more or less conscious effort of the ruling groups in society to produce a system of thought that transcended the potentially divisive elements in society. "There is implicit in the word 'ideology' the insight that in certain situations the collective unconsciousness of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it." There was an inherent quality of static conservatism in the concept of ideology for Mannheim.

The rise of fascism and the atrocities of World War Two prompted political theorists and historians to cast a cold eye on ideology. They concluded that ideology lay at the bottom of many evils in twentieth-century mass society. Ideology became a synonym for irrational thought and action. Studying the rhetoric of fascism that helped to produce emotional enthusiasm in the masses, these critics decided that politics must be freed from the shackles of ideology. Rationality was to be made the hallmark of political activity. Ideology in contemporary political analysis has come to mean simply "the distortion of thought by interest--public or private, consciously or unconsciously known--and the study of such distortion."

In 1960, Daniel Bell declared that ideology had come to an end. He maintained that nineteenth-century ideologies could no longer claim truth for their outlook, and he reiterated the intellectual's fear of the masses and any form of social action. "For the radical intellectual who had articulated the revolutionary impulses of the past century and a half, all this (the experiences from 1930 to 1950) has meant an end to chiliastic hopes, to millenarism, to apocalyptic thinking—and to ideology. For ideology, which once was a road to action, has come to a dead end." Bell looked upon the association of ideology and passion and the dynamic quality of ideology itself with some misgivings. If ideology discovered truth only in the process of action, then he wanted it separated from politics. He deplored the tendency to convert concrete political programs into ideological formulations. This investment of passion and moral coloration into political conflict invited disaster for society.

The concept of ideology has been the vehicle of varied and sometimes contradictory ideas. It cannot be suggested that the concept has emerged from its historical career as a value-free analytical tool, but its association with different ideas has given it a potential synthetic quality. The dynamic qualities and the nonrational characteristics that are associated with ideology are not included in many formal systems of political and historical analysis. With the proper definition, ideology can integrate these ideas into an analytical technique. A workable concept of ideology should provide a functional link between the perception of reality and the political activity of

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The weakness in most past uses of the term ideology has been the tendency to define it as a fixed quantity rather than a process.

II. Toward A Definition of Ideology

Ideology is the critical link between thought and action, the meeting place of knowledge and power. Social forces and factors of environment are brought together to produce a picture of the world that serves as the basis for action. The synthetic qualities of ideology may be regarded as either harmful or beneficial. Dante Germino suggests that from the "merging of theory and practice, we have the destruction of both realms and their transformation into the bizarre world of ideological politics...." Others describe ideology as an important element in human progress. Regardless of one's judgment of the value of ideology, it is obvious that it defines the link between theory and action.

The general notions driving society forward represent a continuing source of social tension. Whitehead suggests that "a general idea is always a danger to the existing order. The whole bundle of its conceivable special embodiments in various usages of society constitutes a program of reform." These general ideas include the symbols accumulated by a society over generations. They are important enough to exert influence over each succeeding generation. The general ideas and unvoiced assumptions of a group or society may be defined as myths. Sorel's use of myth will form the

14 Germino, op. cit., p. 45.
15 Whitehead, op. cit., p. 22.
basic definition of the term for this study. Myths represent the convictions of a group as they find expression in the language of action. A myth may or may not be "true", but its truth or falsehood depends more upon fundamental values than on the question of literal facts. Myths are the unifying cultural values of a society or of a social system within a society. They perform an integrative function in the system, reinforcing common feelings through the language of symbols. "Political symbols bring out in concentrated form those particular meanings and emotions which the members of a group create and reinforce in each other."  

One of the foundations of ideology is provided by myth. The common emotional energy and shared values of the group provide energy for and set the theoretical limits of an ideological program. Ideology, in one sense, is the rational formulation of these myth-forces. Ideas that bind the group together find specific embodiment in an ideological program. Talcott Parsons suggests that there are non-empirical beliefs which are defined as beyond the reach of the methodology of empirical science. These include ideas about the supernatural and about alleged properties of groups, individuals, and objects. This group of ideas provides the energy for ideology. Ben Halpern, in comparing Sorel and Mannheim, has suggested a schematization of ideology and myth which can be modified to fit the


The unifying cultural values of the group which have their origin in non-empirical beliefs, find expression in the language of ideology. Biological drive and transcendental belief are preserved in ideology and extended by effective rhetoric. The rationality of the ideological process exploits rather than destroys the energy of social values. Ideology is not, however, the simple translation of myth into action. Myth provides only one of the basic components of ideology. The environmental situation of a society or group also contributes to the formation of ideology. The problems of everyday life supply the concrete issues that those disillusioned with ideology would like to make the exclusive components of politics. The social and economic situation of a group is a basic factor determining its perception of reality. The physical tension produced by environment

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is a primary motive of action. Marx developed this idea when he maintained that ideas are a function of economic relationships, but this theory had a tendency to discount the genuine contribution of cultural values and social myths in shaping ideology. It is the convergence of physical tension in the environment and philosophical tension in the realm of unifying cultural myths that produces a social crisis. This condition sets the ideological process in motion. Independently, the objective needs of the group or the symbolic needs of the group can produce an ideological response, but their convergence creates an ideological imperative. The convergence of tension in both systems requires some form of resolution or adjustment.19

A Paradigm of the Ideological Function

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<tr>
<th>Unifying Cultural Myths</th>
<th>Environmental Situation</th>
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<td>(Source of Social Consensus—non-empirical beliefs and dynamic social values expressed in symbols.)</td>
<td>(Economic and social context of the group, expressed by objective facts.)</td>
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→ Ideology (Perpetuation of group dynamism.) (Rational description (Synthesis to produce a society's problems.) description of reality.)

↓ Program (logical, formal theory for action.)

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<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>Plan for Action</th>
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| (Appeals to myth and symbol in oratory—rites of group activity.) | (Constitutions, Platforms, etc. expressing existing reality and potential reality.)

19 The distinction between myth system and environmental situation may seem arbitrary, because these categories obviously overlap and interact. Cultural myths are shaped to a large extent by objective conditions and life situations are influenced considerably by common value patterns. But this distinction provides valuable analytical
Ideology in this system is a functional agent. It presents a picture of reality that contains both the objective factors of existence and the underlying value orientation of the group. Although ideology is divorced from its foundations and its program in the paradigm, it should be clear that an adequate definition of ideology would include all four factors. Ideology is the process by which unifying cultural myths and environmental factors produce a program that includes a plan of action and a system of rhetoric. Ideology does more than describe the world; it attempts to give meaning to existence by producing a program. "It purports to tell us how the system is organized, which desired goals can be promoted, what agencies and channels can most effectively be employed to forward the goals in a given setting, and what the required action will cost various groups in the short and long run in terms of status, power, happiness, wealth, and so on."20

Ideologies are always functioning, but they find their most elaborate and intense expression in times of uncertainty. Social crisis produces a need for formal legitimation of values. "Ideology raises the perception of social conflict to the level of consciousness."21 During times of social stability, ideology is relatively invisible, but in times of crisis and conflict ideology functions to preserve high level values from alteration. These values need not be those that cement existing social arrangements. Ideology is inherently the exclusive tool of neither radical nor reactionary, reformer nor conservative. The ideological function operates to unify


the divisive elements within a society or within a smaller group. On the societal level ideology performs an integrative function among divergent interests in the sense that Mannheim used the concept; however, when it fails to create a balance between society's aspirations and achievements, ideology may serve as a disruptive social force in much the same manner that "Utopia" served this purpose for Mannheim. The diagram above applies equally to the whole society or to a social system within that society. The ideology of a disaffected group may serve to segregate and consolidate groups around rival special positions.

The plan for action is ordinarily a logical proposal for preserving existing social structures or altering them to adapt to changing conditions. But such a plan need not conform to existing standards and values to be a valid expression of ideology. Ideology, by definition, attempts to resolve the conflict of changing values and conditions; it is often involved in questions of the potential and the probable. Ideals which appear to be impractical should be viewed as possible programs of reform. "Such a program is not to be criticized by immediate possibilities. Progress consists in modifying the laws of nature so that the Republic on Earth may conform to that society to be discerned ideally by the divination of Wisdom."[22] Great care should also be taken to avoid condemning a particular ideology for simply appealing to past authority. An appeal to the past is not necessarily reactionary. Because primitivism is not essentially a theory of origins, but really a device "for passing

judgement on contemporary society, it is closely linked with views of the future." Another word of caution is appropriate for those who automatically reject programs that are apocalyptic or chiliastic in vision. If one were convinced that continued stability depended on the perpetuation of existing institutions and society appeared incapable of preserving those institutions, then a prediction of disaster would be an appropriate response.

Rhetoric is a key factor in transmitting the plan of ideology into action. It is the ideal tool of the political party, because it has persuasion as its goal. "Since we want not emancipation from impulse but clarification of impulse, the duty of rhetoric is to bring together action and understanding into a whole that is greater than scientific perception." Rhetoric is designed to tap the energy of men's feelings. It rests on the assumption that our language is so intimately bound up in our emotions that it always carries a power beyond its objective meaning. The orator uses the language of symbol and analogy to link his program with the higher ideals and shared values of the society. In a sense, he reestablishes a direct tie between his listener and the guiding myths of his audience to legitimize the program of ideology.

The orator is not bound by the objective conditions of his contemporary world. He dwells in the world of a more perfect, if not ideal, society. Richard Weaver suggests that "the discourse of the noble rhetorician...will be about real potentiality or possible actuality...." As in the case of the plan of action, the substance

23 Littell, op. cit., p. 51.
of rhetoric need not be a perfect reflection of reality. The orator
is interested in only one reality: that which is directly involved
with his program. He walks the line between truth and falsehood.
"The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false defini-
tion of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally
false conception come true." 26 The orator often pushes his ideas
to the limits of his logical system. He appeals to tradition because
ideology is the product of history, and history offers a means of per-
suasion and a criticism of contemporary society.

Ideology is a process. It is a mirror of reality, but it
is also a call to action as Bell suggests. The problems of everyday
life and the values of society produce tension and energy that is
translated into a political program with its own system of rhetoric.
The historian is usually confronted with the results of the process,
and he must look behind the formal program and its rhetoric to dis-
cover the foundations of ideology. The analytical divisions of this
definition provide tentative categories of analysis for such an in-
vestigation.

III. Ideology, the Populists and the Contemporary Historian

"It is safe to assume that further critical work is unneces-
sary and that scholars can resume the study of the movement for its

26 Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, revised and
enlarged edition (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe,
With these words Norman Pollack attempted to bring to a close a scholarly discussion of Populism that has been going on for the last fifteen years among American historians. His suggestion that Populism may now be studied for its own sake raises a question: for whose sake has it been studied in recent years? Most of the recent work has been done in the field of intellectual history, in particular, in the area of political ideology and rhetoric. Oscar Handlin began the new evaluation of the Populists in 1951 with an article on American attitudes toward the Jew at the beginning of the twentieth century. He indicated that Populism might be one of the sources of twentieth-century American nativism and anti-Semitism. Victor Ferkiss extended the list of Populist descendants to include American fascism in an article published in 1955. In that same year a collection of essays, The New American Right, was published under the editorship of Daniel Bell. The contributors to this collection used the term "populist" in a general sense to describe various irrational and reactionary phenomena in American life rather than as a name for the ideology of a specific historical movement. Peter Viereck and Edward A. Shils developed the fascist theme and linked

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the Populists directly to McCarthyism in books published in 1956. 28

Richard Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* appeared in 1955, and it remains the most thorough-going revision of an earlier progressive interpretation of Populism. The standard view of Populism as a frontier political response to agrarian economic problems, found in such works as John D. Hicks' *Populist Revolt*, was seriously challenged by Hofstadter. Looking into the American past for the roots of McCarthyism in the 1950's, Hofstadter discovered a disturbing irrational, ethnocentric and anti-Semitic flavor in Populist rhetoric. He saw both a "hard" and a "soft" side to the agrarian mentality: the soft side made use of the yeoman myth and found expression in agrarian radicalism and third party movements, while the hard side saw the farmer as a businessman involved in cooperation and pressure politics. The Populist was a frustrated small capitalist attempting to recover his prestige and profits in the fact of exploitation and unfavorable markets. He was retrogressive, saw history as a conspiracy, and used anti-Semitic rhetoric. Hofstadter used the behavioral scientist's tools of status mobility and consensus in his reevaluation. His work was based primarily on the new insights that these tools provided rather than on new information. 29

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The work of the revisionist historians has been directed to the Populist rhetoric and, to some extent, to the cultural myths of the farmer. While the standard view of Populism had dealt with the economic problems of the farmer and his proposed solutions, the revisionists stressed the irrational and reactionary tone of his political utterances. The traditional interpretation had ignored the dark side of Populist rhetoric, but many revisionists lost sight of the genuine problems of the farmer and his programs for reform. Many revisionists took the rhetoric of Populism out of its historical context to be used as an analytical tool in describing disturbing currents in the recent American past. This use of the image was, in itself, valid; however, the historical meaning of Populism has been obscured in the process. Instead of attempting to overcome the bias of a post-Nazi world view, many revisionists have confronted the movement with their value judgments intact. This is one sense in which Populism has not been studied for its own sake.

The continued attack on the Populists brought a response from those historians who saw something of value in their program. John Higham challenged the assertion that Populists were anti-Semitic in a series of three articles published between 1956 and 1959. C. Vann Woodward came to the defense of Southern Populists in an article in 1959 and in a chapter of the Burden of Southern History that appeared in 1960. He suggested that most Americans of the 1890's suffered from apocalyptic delusions and a belief in conspiracy, and that while there had been "thought control and racist bigotry and lynching spirit," the Populists "were far more often the victims than the perpetrators" of such activities. Walter Nugent concluded
a careful statistical analysis of the Kansas Populists in 1963. He
concluded that there was some validity to their economic claims,
and that they were not nativist or significantly anti-Semitic.30

Norman Pollack is the most outspoken critic to date of the
revisionists in general and Richard Hofstadter in particular. He
has presented an alternative to the Hofstadter interpretation in
a series of articles, a book, and a collection of readings published
since 1960. Pollack denies that the Populists were retrogressive,
irrational, nativistic, or anti-Semitic. He rejects the consensus
theory and maintains that the Populist critique of society was valid.
He does not stop with a simple criticism of Hofstadter, but presents
his own interpretation of the movement. He regards Populism as a
class movement of farmers and workers which "accepted industrialism
but opposed its capitalistic form...." He maintains that "had

(Sept., 1957); Higham, "The Cult of the American Consensus," Commentary, XVII(April, 1959); C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist
Heritage and the Intellectual," American Scholar, XXIX (Winter,
1959-60); Woodward, The Burden of Southern History (Baton Rouge:
Louisiana State University Press, 1960) p. 150; Walter T. K.
Nugent, The Tolerant Populists; Kansas Populism and Nativism
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); and Nugent, "Some
Populism succeeded, it could have fundamentally altered American society in a Socialist direction.\textsuperscript{31}

The critics of the revisionists have carried on their argument within the areas of rhetoric and cultural values for the most part. John Higham and C. Vann Woodward have suggested that Populist rhetoric was not irrational and anti-Semitic, but they have not reexamined the environmental situation of the farmer or his plan for action in any detail. Walter Nugent explored the economic and social factors behind the movement, but his analysis of rhetoric was guided by a search for nativism and anti-Semitism to the exclusion of other factors. Norman Pollack's suggestion that Populists were social revolutionaries reveals a concentration on the words of the movement's leaders that ignores the plan for action adopted by the membership.

The argument between Hofstadter and Pollack provides the most important source of questions for an ideological study of the Populists.\textsuperscript{32} Hofstadter maintains that Populism was an expression of the soft side of agrarianism; the farmer as a Populist saw him-


\textsuperscript{32} The Hofstadter-Pollack argument came to a head at a session of the Southern Historical Association in 1964 when Pollack, Handlin, Irwin Unger, and J. Rogers Hollingsworth all presented their views on Populism. The discussion was published in Agricultural History, XXXIX (April, 1965).
self as an independent yeoman at the mercy of vast impersonal forces. Hofstadter outlines five major components in the Populist ideology: first, the return to a utopia in the past; second, the natural harmony of the producing classes; third, a dualistic social struggle between the people and the monied interests; fourth, a conspiracy theory of history; and fifth, the primacy of money policy as the solution to economic problems. Pollack disagrees on almost every point in this analysis. A comparison of Hofstadter and Pollack on these issues should yield some important questions.

Hofstadter suggests that the orientation of the Populists was to the past. Their utopia had its origin in the early decades of the national experience when the farmer's role in the life of the nation had been more important. This earlier age was superior to the conditions of the 1890's because the health of society was believed to be directly proportional to the influence of the agricultural community. What they really wanted was to "restore the conditions prevailing before the development of industrialism and the commercialization of agriculture." 33

Pollack argues that the Populists were in no way tied to the past. He maintains that they borrowed selectively from the past in order to establish standards of right applicable to all periods of time. The Populists did not attempt to restore an earlier way of life; they "accepted industrialism but opposed its capitalistic form, seeking instead a more equitable distribution of wealth." 34 This class movement of farmers and laborers looked to the future for a

33 Hofstadter, op. cit., pp. 61-2.
solution to its problems.

The use of the past is an important element in ideology, and several questions should be asked of the Populists. What use did the Populists make of the past? Was it the source of meaningful social values to be employed in persuasion, or was it simply a collection of irrelevant and worn-out slogans? Were the unifying cultural myths of the group reinforced by references to the past? Did the ideas and experiences of the past contribute to a realistic plan for action, or did they obscure the real problems facing the Populists? To what extent did the Populists use the past as a critique of present institutions and as a legitimation of their program?

Both Hofstadter and Pollack discovered that the Populists accepted the concept of the natural harmony of the agricultural and laboring classes. They also agree that the Populists saw a simplified social struggle between the producing classes and the monied interests. Hofstadter describes these assumptions as a delusive simplicity that glossed over complex social relationships and made the Populists susceptible to simplistic solutions. Pollack, on the other hand, finds these assumptions to be a realistic response to the problems of the 1890's. The structure of American society had produced a dualistic social conflict and provided for the common interests of laborers and farmers. "The underprivileged were being disadvantaged by a common system, industrial capitalism; they were all assuming the same position at the bottom of the social structure, and were being kept divided so as not to coalesce in a united challenge to existing arrangements...." 35 The ideological questions in this area should be directed

35 Pollack, Populist Mind, p. xlvi.
primarily to the environmental situation. Did the economic and social conditions of the 1890's justify a simplified view of common interests and class conflict? If conditions did not justify these views, then what cultural factors account for this kind of response?

Hofstadter's conspiracy theory includes most of the evils that he associates with Populism. The belief in an international money conspiracy reveals the inherent provincialism, nativism, isolationism and anti-Semitism in the movement. The apocalyptic vision, and the anti-urban, anti-business, anti-labor feelings of the Populists fit into this pattern. The Populists did not single out a few conspiratorial acts; on the contrary, they wove "a vast fabric of social explanation out of nothing but skeins of evil plots."

The irrational base of the Populist program provided fertile ground for leaders with paranoid tendencies who could turn their psychic disturbances into political assets. It is the best example of a peculiar American "proneness to fits of moral exsading that would be fatal if they were not sooner or later tempered with a measure of apathy and of common sense."

Pollack vigorously denies that Populism was an intellectually bankrupt response to economic problems. He suggests that their critique went beyond immediate economic problems to deal with the problem of the individual's dehumanization and loss of autonomy in an increasingly more complex society.

"Populism was a movement of great intellectual ferment: farmers met at schoolhouses and in picnic groves to discuss issues, editors followed national events closely and commented extensively on government policies and economic conditions, and meetings were held to

36 Hofstadter, op. cit., pp. 71, 35.
draft resolutions.  

The conspiracy theory suggests some important ideological questions. To what extent did the Populist rhetoric contain the irrational tendencies that Hofstadter's analysis suggests? Was a conspiracy theory justified by the condition of the economy and society of the 1890's? Was the negative response of the farmers more important to their ideology than their program for reform? To what extent did they ignore the genuine issues of their day? Did the abstract symbols of conspiracy provide anything of value to the movement?

The final weakness in the Populist ideology for Hofstadter was the doctrine of the primacy of money. The acceptance of monetary reform as a key to economic problems was a mistake; the free-silver panacea obscured the real issues confronting society. Pollack maintains that the Populists' program was a comprehensive plan to solve society's problems. It was the rejection of industrial capitalism: "had Populism succeeded, it could have fundamentally altered American society in a Socialist direction." What kind of an alternative did the Populists offer to their contemporary society? Was it one that accepted the capitalist-industrial order, or was it an attempt to destroy this structure and replace it with a new order? Was the program a thorough-going reform of society or simply the acceptance of attractive panaceas?

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37 Pollack, Populist Mind, p. xxxix.

The scholarly discussion of Populism in recent years has revealed new facets of the movement and raised important questions about its ideology. There has, however, been a tendency among many historians to examine isolated aspects of the movement. The Populist rhetoric has been the subject of frequent study, but its relationship to the environmental situation, the unifying cultural myths and the program for action of the farmer has often been overlooked. Richard Hofstadter is one of the few historians who has examined the unifying cultural myths of the agrarian society, and he has attempted to relate these values to Populist rhetoric. His effort has uncovered some important questions, but his analysis tended to minimize the impact of genuine economic problems and the programs for action on the rhetoric of the movement. Others have studied the relationship of the environmental conditions and rhetoric, but have avoided the question of cultural myths.

Populism in Texas will provide the setting for this study of the ideology of the farmers' movement. There will be an attempt to relate the unifying social values of the agrarian community to the institutional structure and group dynamics of the 1890's. The relationship of the farmer's economic situation and his plan for reform will be explored. The rhetoric of the movement will be linked to non-empirical group forces in an attempt to discover what the Populists themselves understood their words to mean. The process whereby unifying cultural myths and environmental circumstances produce a perception of reality and program for action will be explored, and the plan for action and the rhetoric which results from this process will also be analyzed.
CHAPTER TWO

The Populist Impulse in Texas

The Populist impulse found many different forms of expression in Texas. There were weekly meetings of the local Alliance, campaign speeches of People's Party candidates, military parades of Gideon's Band and songfests by Populist glee clubs. But the most distinctive feature of the Populist technique was the campmeeting. Following the pattern of an evangelical revival, the campmeeting combined many forms of Populist activity and held out the promise of spiritual and political renewal to the farmer. The following section describes a gathering that might have taken place in Texas during the summer months of any year in the early 1890's. It is not a description of a specific meeting, but of the pattern for such a meeting.

I. Political Revivalism on an August Day

All morning long the wagon loads of farmers continued to arrive at the picnic grove. Many had come great distances; some had even arrived the night before. The delightful smell of a campfire breakfast still hung in the air when several hundred people gathered before the speaker's platform which was draped in red, white and blue. Around the edges of the campground one could see tents being pitched and stalls erected. Soon signs would appear advertising all kinds of refreshments for sale, games and entertainment, and the latest political tracts. As the sun rose higher in
the sky, the leaders took their places on the platform, and stray children were gathered up as families sought a comfortable patch of grass or a bit of welcome shade. The carnival of confusion and good humor gave way to an attentive atmosphere as the meeting was called to order.

The opening prayer called down the blessings of God upon these humble tillers of the soil; these people who suffered the abuse of men just as their Savior had suffered nineteen hundred years before; these people that had gathered together to hear the political gospel of universal emancipation. Soon the strains of "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" could be heard on the morning breeze as the last of the farmers pulled their wagons to a halt at the edge of the campground. After a few announcements about the day's activities, the group was addressed by the first speaker.

The opening address was given by Reverend A. W. Dumas, a Presbyterian with a reputation as one who preaches politics from the Bible and who uses the good book in every one of his speeches to prove that the Populist platform is the voice of universal Christianity.39 His address was not a simple explanation of the relationship of Christian principles to Populism; it was a two-hour journey through the Old and New Testaments. After establishing the essential nature of man in Genesis as a toiler who is to eat the bread by the sweat of his face, Dumas gathered evidence from the histories of the Old Testament to show the evils of exploitation. By the time

he reached the story of Job, his words were bringing tears to the eyes to his audience. The plight of this man, he suggested, was not unlike that of his audience at the hands of the money lenders:

They drive away the ass of the fatherless,
they take the widow's ox for a pledge.
They turn the needy out of the way: the poor of the earth hide themselves together.
Behold, as wild asses in the desert, go they forth to their work: rising betimes for a prey....

They pluck the fatherless from the breast and take a pledge of the poor.
They cause him to go naked without clothing, and they take away the sheaf from the hungry. (Job, 24: 3-5, 9-10)

Dumas continued to weave his fabric of scripture and politics until he had convinced his listeners that the sub-treasury plan was ordained by divine wisdom. He showed them how the word of God forbids mortgages, usury, and alien ownership of land. When he reached the New Testament, his pleas for charity by the wealthy of the land brought loud approval from the crowd:

But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind;
And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just. (Luke 15: 13-14)

His speech came to a close in Revelation with the opening of the seven seals. "On the day that the sun is darkened and the moon turned
red with blood," he declared, "the great and rich men will seek to
hide from the face of God, but it will be in vain." He assured his
audience that justice would be done.

An official of the local Alliance addressed the group for
the remaining hour of the morning session, and the group was then
dismissed for the barbeque that had been prepared. The children ran
off to the amusement park while their elders sat in the shade ex-
changing the latest gossip from the neighboring county. Soon a
group had gathered around the barbeque pit to sing the songs of the
People's Party. The sound of the chorus of "The People's Jubilee" soon
attracted a large crowd:

The working people are getting tired
of having no home nor land;
So now, they say, to run this government,
They are going to try their hand.
There's gold and silver in the White House cellar,
And the workers all want some
For they know it will be all counted out
When the peoples' party comes.

Chorus: The people laugh, ha, ha!
The bosses, oh! how blue!
It must be now the jubilee is coming
In the year of ninety-two.

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1.o Songs for the Toiler, pp. 26-27, as quoted in Roscoe C. Martin,
The People's Party in Texas; A Study in Third Party Politics
(Austin: University of Texas, 1933), p. 169.
When the festivities of the early afternoon had calmed down, the afternoon meeting was begun.

The featured speaker of the day was "Cyclone" Davis, or "Methodist Jim," as some people called him. From under his seat, James Davis picked up a ten-volume set of the works of Thomas Jefferson which he set on the table beside him on the platform. The sun was now very hot, but the people didn't seem to mind, perhaps because they knew that they were about to hear the words of the founding fathers from a man who knew their words well. James H. Davis was one of the most popular Alliance lecturers in the state, and the people had been anxiously awaiting his visit for weeks. The handsome young lawyer did not disappoint his audience. The clear voice of the tall figure on the platform had soon transformed his audience into religious crusaders out to restore the fundamental principles of the Constitution.

Davis' target was the corporation. This "creature in law" was an unnatural and unholy being. It was not made by God and it was not given dominion over the earth. Davis then proceeded to review the history of the United States to show how the principles of justice had been altered to bring misery and suffering on the people. He found the greatest problem in American history to be the transfer of Congress' right to act directly on the people to private corporations. He showed how the platform of the People's Party would restore to the hands of the people the powers of government that had been celebrated by Jefferson and Madison. Each plank of the platform was a crucial element in the restoration of democratic principles. The mission of the party was to break up the unholy combination
of corporate greed and judicial usurpation. This could be done only by abolishing the National Bank and issuing currency directly to the people.

Davis maintained that the farmer was like the humble Nazarene who had found no place to lay his head. He delivered a poem to express the feelings that overwhelmed him as he contemplated Jesus Christ laying aside his workman's tools to put on heaven's robes:

The hand of labor smote the earth,
And a thousand blessings came;
But he whose labor brought them forth,
Is forbid to use the same.

His hands have decked the earth with homes,
Yet he must homeless be;
No earthly spot to call his own,
No where from sea to sea.

He's filled the earth with food and clothes,
Yet he is hungry and cold;
A slave, a hopeless, helpless slave,
Just as they were of old.

His hands have leveled mountains down,
And filled up gorge and vales,
He's strung the earth with lightning veins,
And belted it with rails.

He's geared the flames in iron rings,
With flying homes on wheels;
Yet he must tramp, or else not go
While others ride in these.
He's builded churches, grand, sublime,
Where others go to pray;
Yet if he goes to worship there,
He's rudely pushed away.

This life to him is a weary night
of toil, dismay and gloom;
His soul corrodes with sin and vice,
And hell his hopeless doom.

Davis described the crisis that faced Christian civilization. The retrogression of agriculture in American society promised only national decay and eventual ruin. But he left a door open to redeem civilization: that door was the People's Party. He closed with a stirring prediction of success for the movement: "The Bible is our model, the Constitution our guide, the writings of Jefferson, Madison, Calhoun, Jackson and Lincoln our finger boards, and the People's Party platform is our vestibule! Limited train with a compound engine, and those who stand in the way must clear the track or be run over."42

Following the afternoon meeting there was another meal and more informal entertainment, but that was not the end of the day's activity. Another meeting was held by torchlight in the evening, and afterwards the men gathered in small groups. They discussed the ideas they had heard that day far into the night.

The day had been one full of excitement and activity, but the camp-

42 Ibid, p. 5.
meeting was far from over. The same kind of program would continue for four or five days, and on the last day of the encampment the local gathering was expecting a visit from a leader of the national organization. The sponsors of the event had promised that either Mary E. Lease or General James B. Weaver himself would be present to address the group, and a crowd of 5,000 to 10,000 was expected for the event. 43

The appeal of the encampment was not simply the anticipation of a holiday from the routine drudgery of rural life; the meeting presented an opportunity for spiritual and political rebirth. In addition to the barbecue pit, the amusement park and the community sing, there was an opportunity to live and breathe the stuff of reform. The eternal truths of the People's Party were celebrated in hymns, prayed for vocally, and debated for days at a time. Besides the merry-go-round, the dancing pavilion and the amateur talent show, the farmer reestablished his sense of community with his neighbor. For that one week, at least, he was part of a wonderful spectacle. He was part of a movement that would bring civilization back from the brink of disaster.

II. The Origins of the Impulse

John D. Hicks suggests that Populism had its origin in the real or imagined suffering of the farmer at the hands of the rail-

43 The encampment described above did not actually take place, but the events included all took place at one time or another during camp meetings in the 1890's. Descriptions and announcements of these proceedings abounded in the July and August issues of the Southern Mercury. The summer of 1895 was a particularly active summer for these activities. See the issues of the Southern Mercury for July 18, July 25, August 1, and August 29, 1895; and the Galveston Daily News, October 31, 1893.
roads, the trusts, the middlemen, the money-lenders and the currency system. The convergence of these factors produced falling prices of agricultural products between 1870 and 1897; a credit system that led to increased mortgaging, tenancy and a one-crop agriculture; and unfair governmental credit regulation, currency control, taxation and tariff rates. The sense of frustration in the agricultural community was intensified by the decline in available new farming lands. The frontier had been turned back on itself. Farmers who had once escaped frustration by packing up and moving West were now forced to remain where they were and face their problems. Richard Hofstadter suggests that the closing of the frontier did not actually take place until the Populists had disappeared from the scene. The real problems of the farmer were in the international market, where an international price decline from the 1870's to the 1890's determined the domestic price of products that were exported in large quantities.

The arguments of both Hicks and Hofstadter have relevance in describing the origin of the Populist impulse in Texas. The farmers in Texas did suffer from falling prices and an inflexible credit structure, but they also saw that their problems were linked to the international market. Farm mortgages steadily increased, along with the one-crop, crop-lien, and tenancy systems. While open lands continued to be available in Texas, much of the land in choice agricultural regions was passing into the hands of the railroads, large ranchers, and foreign land speculators. To compound these problems

Hicks, op. cit., pp. 36-95; and Hofstadter, op. cit., pp. 50-56.
a severe drought began to hit western regions of the state in the 1880's, and it continued into the nineties. These factors were important to the Populist impulse that swept across Texas and the South after 1835. The Greenback movement had ceased to be an important factor in Texas politics after the election of 1884. Fusion with the Republicans and incorporation of important parts of their program into the Democratic platform had destroyed the movement, but in less than two years the Farmers' Alliance was posing a new threat to Democratic control.

The new organizers swept through old Granger strongholds picking up members from the older organizations and adding new converts. Farmers in Texas joined the Alliance in droves; in the year between August 1885, and August 1886, the Texas membership increased from six or seven hundred to twenty-seven hundred. The dynamic growth of the movement during this period was not limited to the South; however, national membership increased more than four times between 1885 and 1890. The membership of 232,000 had grown to more than 1,050,000 by 1890.

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Historians have explained the sudden growth of Northern and Southern Alliances that finally resulted in formation of the People's Party in a number of ways. Richard Hofstadter has suggested that the agrarian revolt was related to the threat of industrial society to traditional values. The farmer felt that he was losing his status in society. At the heart of the farmers' movement lay the question of rank in society. It was his sense that the upper and middle, urban classes were displacing him, that led the farmer to take action. Theodore Saloutos described the development of Alliance strength as a part of a broadly-based social upheaval of the late 1880's. The growth of the Alliance coincided with the rapid expansion of the Knights of Labor. "Perhaps the labor disturbances of 1884-1896 and the victories against the railroads, the giant corporations of the day, had a chain reaction on the farmers and partly accounts for the sudden growth of the Alliance."47

The rapid development of enthusiastic support for the Alliance in Texas was related to both the economic conditions of the farmer and his cultural values. The Populist impulse was not simply the result of an agrarian myth slipping from its position of priority on the ladder of social emulation, nor was it simply part of a nationwide social reform movement. The farmers of Texas had some genuine economic grievances that produced a plan for action when they were joined with the force of communal values. The ideology of the Texas Populists was not a purely rational analysis of economic ills, nor was it simply an expression of irrational forces in an emotional rhetoric. From the objective economic and social context of their

47 Hofstadter, op. cit., pp. 33-35; and Saloutos, op. cit., p. 72.
lives and from the non-empirical and dynamic forces of their community, the Texas Populists produced an image of reality that served as the basis for their diagnosis of society's problems and their suggested cure for those problems.

III. The Environmental Situation of the Texas Farmer

The dramatic economic and social changes that took place in Texas in the late nineteenth century contributed to the instability of the agricultural community. The simple factor of growth provides an important dimension of change. In an address to the Boston Chamber of Commerce in 1894, Governor Hogg described the changes that had taken place in Texas between 1870 and 1893. The population had grown from 818,000 to 2,400,000. The acres of farmland under cultivation had increased from 1,800,000 to more than 9,000,000. Cotton production had increased six times, corn production four times, and wheat production had gone from 115,000 bushels to 6,553,000. The 320 miles of railroad completed in 1870 were then part of a 9,250 mile network. Generalized percentage figures conceal the dynamic changes that were taking place in the society. Those engaged in agricultural production made up 70 percent of the population in 1870. This figure had dropped only 5 points to 65% by 1900, but this apparent stability masks the fact that the nonagricultural wage earners grew from 7,000 in 1870, to over 25,000 in 1893, while the number of farmers increased from 1,500,000 in 1880, to 3,000,000 by 1900. The simple fact of growth

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itself contributed to the dislocation and disorganization of large segments of the Texas population in the Populist era.

In the midst of these changes, the farmer in Texas was faced with a number of problems. The most important economic factor in his discontent was the price of crops.49 The major crop in Texas was cotton; 2 million bales were produced in the state in 1890. The price of cotton fell steadily in the United States and on the international market after 1873. A bale of cotton that had sold for more than $.15 per pound in the middle of the 1870's would not even bring $.06 per pound in the mid-nineties. As prices continued to decline, the farmer in debt discovered that he was meeting his obligations with appreciated money. The farmer found that his own costs were rising: land prices continued to increase and good lands were fast disappearing. Equipment, seed and fertilizer continued to rise in price, and the cost of hired labor increased. Not only did hired labor cost more, but it was more difficult to obtain because of the lure of better wages in urban industry.50 The farmer was caught in a price squeeze that pushed from two directions simultaneously.

The Texas farmer looked to the credit system for relief from his dilemma, but that alternative was also fraught with dangers. Although Texas fared much better than many Southern states, its banking system was inadequate to the task of financing cotton and

49 "Price declines, more than any single factor, have a relevance in interpreting and predicting agrarian revolt. Farm insurgency is not a matter of type of farming, it is a response to extreme price and market fluctuations." John L. Shover, Cornbelt Rebellion: The Farmers' Holiday Association (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 12.

50 Hicks, op. cit., p. 56; and LaWanda F. Cox, "The American Agricultural Wage Earner, 1865-1900", Agricultural History, XXII (April, 1948), pp. 95-111.
grain marketing. The number of national banks had increased from eighteen in 1860 to one hundred and eighty-nine in 1890; deposits had grown from $2 million to $30 million in the same period. Nevertheless, in vast areas the interest rates on crop loans were so high that they were out of the reach of the average farmer. More often, the farmer sought credit from his local merchant who lent money on a contract that obligated the farmer to plant a particular crop, usually cotton. Once the marginal farmer was tied to this crop-lien system it was only a question of time until he fell into bankruptcy or became a tenant farmer.

Land values continued to rise in Texas during this period, but the high rates of interest on mortgages produced another drain on the farmer's resources. The rate in Texas varied between 6 and 12 percent in the 1890's. The farmer saw his neighbors and himself slipping into tenancy in the late nineteenth century. In 1880, 37.6 percent of those working the land in Texas were tenants. By 1890, this figure had jumped to 41.9 percent, and by 1900 almost half of the farmers in Texas, 49.7 percent, did not own the land they tilled.

The problem of land was not limited to the burden of high mortgage rates, foreclosure, and tenancy. The farmer saw the open lands in West Texas and the Panhandle falling under the domination of large ranchers and land speculators. Twenty-six new counties

51 Cotner, James Stephen Hogg, pp. 325-326.

were created in the Panhandle alone between 1876 and 1886, and most of the land in these regions was held in large tracts. In addition to the problem of large ranchers fencing in the open land that he wanted for settlement, the farmer saw foreign corporations taking possession of vast tracts of land. The most famous example was the 3 million acre tract of land that was later to become the XIT Ranch. The State of Texas had pledged the land to a group of Chicago financiers who had agreed to finance the building of the State Capitol. The contract required American ownership of the lands, but the Chicago firm, caught in a squeeze, had sold its stock in England. The publicity that surrounded these dealings aroused the farmer to call for an elimination of alien ownership of land.

The question of landholding also involved the railroads. Besides charging the farmer what he thought were exorbitant rates for shipping his produce to market, the railroads had been given vast tracts of land to help finance their construction. The farmer felt that these lands should be returned to the state and opened up for settlement. The government had provided lands and capital to aid the railroads, and in the farmer's eyes, they had responded by developing monopolistic power over the community. The farmer wanted the benefits of the railroads to be placed at the public's disposal.

In the midst of these conditions, the Farmers' Alliance was born in western Texas. The spark that set the fire of radical

enthusiasm, destined to sweep eastward across Texas and the South, was the freeze of 1884-1885 and the drought that followed. 54 By 1886, the crops in western Texas were almost a complete failure due to the drought, and the Farmers' Alliance was on its way to becoming a national movement. The problems of falling commodity prices, an inadequate credit system, decreasing ability to buy and hold land, and increasing costs of marketing products were forged into the Populist impulse in the heat of a drought that continued to plague Texas into the nineties. The Texas farmer, surveying his situation, saw much to displease him, but this discontent would probably not have produced the Populist response by itself. The farmer also saw his traditional institutions and values being threatened by changes in society.

IV. The Cultural Values of the Texas Farmer

The unifying cultural myths of a group are not simply instrumental ideas. The transcendental beliefs and symbols that have survived through generations of experience are not tied to the attainment of a specific goal. These non-empirical beliefs are of such importance to the group that their preservation is deemed essential to the continued existence of the group. Cultural values, however, do not remain static; unifying myths are continually chang-

ing in limited ways. This evolutionary process comes under severe
strain in times of rapid social change. The various symbols and
myths that have been collected by a group may become the weapons of
opposing interests in an ideological struggle.

The Populist movement in Texas gained its greatest follow¬
ing among the subsistence or marginal farmers. Unlike the prosperous
farmer of the fertile black soil regions of eastern Texas, the mar¬
ginal farmer of West Texas and the post oak strip had limited con¬
tacts with the institutions beyond his local community. His economic
condition denied him frequent contact with commercial and urban
institutions. The unifying cultural myths of this group of marginal
farmers are the most important ones for the study of Populist ideology.

The essential ingredient in a Texas farmer's value system
was, quite naturally, the primacy of farming as a way of life and
the superiority of the farmer's role in society. The primary myths
of a group ordinarily focus on the position of the group itself.
The farmer saw himself as the key figure in civilization, practicing
the fundamental employment of man. "Our civilization may be likened
to an endless chain, which is turned by a pinion representing the
farmer; when the farmer moves everything moves."55 Other occupations
existed only to aid agriculture; the only essential producers in the
economy were farmers. In addition to being the source of society's
wealth, the agricultural community was the dwelling place of its

55 Harry Tracy, The Sub-Treasury Plan, published as an appendix to
James H. Davis, A. Political Revelation (Dallas: The Advance
essential spiritual and political values:

The farmer is the great conservative element in American politics that keeps things steady and can always be relied upon to cast his whole weight in favor of home and right. His life is more isolated and alone, and, as a consequence, is conducive to depth and breadth of thought, while the life of nearly every other class of society is spent in contact with his fellowman, and is thereby more conducive to polish and address than to depth and breadth. 56

The alleged properties of farming were that it was the basic employment of man yielding society's genuine wealth, and that it produced political and spiritual virtue in the farmer. These ideas did not require empirical validation for the farmer to accept them.

The farmer felt that his central position in American society was being challenged in the 1880's and the 1890's, and he saw this as a dangerous drifting from the moorings of his fathers. American society was rapidly approaching a crisis as a civilization; the nation could not long withstand the degradation of the farmer. "Retrogression in American agriculture means national decay and utter and inevitable ruin," declared Leonidas Polk in 1891. "Powerful and promising as is this young giant republic, yet, its power and glory cannot survive the degradation of the American farmer." 57

56 Letter from C. W. Macune in the Southern Mercury, April 19, 1888.
57 Message of L. L. Polk at Ocala, Florida, December 2, 1890; ibid, December 18, 1890.
The myth of agriculture as a superior way of life was related to the pastoral ideal of the eighteenth century. Nature was the source of values. Anything that promoted the harmony of man and nature was judged to be beneficial. Land had a special significance to the marginal farmer. Since true wealth was produced by the application of labor to land, landholding was seen as being essential to genuine security. It was the farmer's interaction with nature by working the soil that produced his special virtue. If he were forced off of the land, his tie with nature would be broken and his virtue would be destroyed.

Richard Hofstadter maintains that the central feature of the myth of agricultural life was the picture of an independent yeoman farmer. He suggests that the conflict in American society which produced the agrarian revolt was primarily one between folkways and folklore, on the one hand, and the application of scientific rationality, on the other. The myth of the self-reliant yeoman became stronger as it grew more fictional in fact. As the farmer was gradually forced to become more of a commercialized businessman, he held more tenaciously to noncommercial values. While the marginal farmer placed a premium on self-reliance, he was not tied to a yeoman image. What he really wanted was simply to remain a farmer, regardless of the type of farmer. Paul Johnstone diagnosed the values of the farmer in terms that are similar to Hofstadter's: "This concept of the farm as a gentle haven from the world's strife is in flat contradiction
to the tendencies toward commercialization, mechanization, specialization, and urbanization..."\(^5^3\) The farmer was not so much opposed to these developments as he was to the fact that they threatened his ability to remain a farmer of any kind.

The central position of agriculture in the values of the Texas farmer was not a simple reflection of a desire to return to an earlier simplicity. The myth of agrarian life had a dynamic quality that served to underwrite changing institutions and ideas. Because the myth was a generalized value not tied to particular goals, it functioned to relieve the tension among specific goals in the farmers' movement. The farmer was not opposed to mechanization and industrialization. There was tension between the farmer's fear of corporations and his desire for progress, but he recognized the need of manufacturing to provide prosperity. "The people have been told over and over again...that the sure road to perpetual prosperity, especially in the agricultural districts, was to secure the location of manufactories in their midst," declared Harry Tracy, "and no one denies this."

As for the commercialization of agriculture, the farmer was continually calling for more railroads into agricultural regions and a deep water port on the Gulf of Mexico to improve his position in the international market. The farmer also accepted the necessity for large-scale organization in a world that was rapidly becoming more specialized. An editorial in the *Southern Mercury* proclaimed that the farmer was living in an age of organization and cooperation: one could scarcely

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find an occupation that was not characterized by its leagues and associations. Organization was "no longer a question of policy, but one of necessity." 59

The position of religion was closely related to the agrarian values of the farmer. Men lived on the earth by nature's law and by God's law. It was God who had given man dominion over the earth and commanded him to live by the sweat of his face. Agriculture was the way of life given to men by God. More important than this fact, however, was the fact that Christ had come to live on earth as a simple laborer; the Son of God had lived in a condition not unlike that of the farmer. Thomas Nugent, a Populist candidate for governor, described this striking similarity in these words:

He was a carpenter, clad no doubt in coarse raiment and pursuing His vocation with diligence and skill. He was poor, very poor...Ye tenents that labor and stint that landlords may flourish and grow fatten upon your toil, behold your sympathizing brother—the landless Savior...No, Christ was not a land monopolist. Neither was he a money monopolist...Yes, Christ's mission is especially to the landless, moneyless toilers. 60

The People's Party became the party of righteousness. Its program was supported by extensive evidence from the scriptures. Opponents

59 Harry Tracy, op. cit., p. 383. A letter in the Southern Mercury, November 20, 1890, proposed railroads running north and west from the Gulf Coast, and talk of a deep water port was common in the pages of the Mercury during 1888 and 1889. Southern Mercury, December 11, 1890.

of the credit structure could point to the fact that usury was forbidden by God in the Scriptures no less than one hundred and sixty-three times. The movement often became involved in the temperance campaign on the side of "righteousness," and many of its leading spokesmen were men of the cloth. 61

The religious character of agrarian life produced an environment in which converts to Populism became faithful followers of a holy cause. Religion provided the most important myths for the movement. Beliefs about the supernatural and the divine sanctioned the Populist organization and program as elements of a holy crusade. The scriptures offered a source of absolute truth which could serve to condemn existing evils or to legitimize programs of change, while the tradition of evangelical revivalism functioned as an unmatched producer of social cohesion.

Almost as close to the heart of the Texas farmer as his religion, was his love for the South and its military heritage of the Civil War. The Populists had a larger share of Civil War veterans for their size than either of the other two parties. The military records of leaders like "Stump" Ashby and Harry Tracy were the subject of frequent discussion. A Populist militia was formed with its own military jargon and sense of armed conflict for the cause of justice. The farmers saw the People's Party transformed into the

"People's Army" in the excitement of military parades.62

The allegiance of farmers to the South was matched by a loyalty to the Democratic Party. The party that had freed the state from the grip of radical rule was more than a political organization in the eyes of the people; it was the symbol of Southern civilization. The loyalty of the people to the Democratic Party was a continuing problem to agrarian leaders. The Greenback Party of the 1870's and 1880's had made some inroads into solidly Democratic regions, but Populists were, in their Democratic neighbor's eyes, "not merely political apostates but traitors to civilization itself...." The Houston Post had no patience with the "malcontents, republicans, and hoodlums...in their foolish venture to fight for reform under the nondescript banner of the so-called people's party."63 The fact that the People's Party was able to draw a considerable amount of support from the Democrats indicates that the farmer's plight was serious enough to allow him to reject an important social value.

The final element in the farmer's value system was his belief in what he called "justice." This was related to the myth of agrarian life, but it found a more specific expression. The farmer believed that land was ultimately the source of all wealth. Applying his sense of justice, the farmer reasoned that a man was entitled to the land required to make a living. He also deserved a fair return on his investment of labor. Where the "natural" order had been disturbed by the intrusion of man-made institutions, he wanted the balance restored. He also wanted a natural distribution of wealth.

62 Hartin, People's Party, p. 163.
63 Hicks, op. cit., p. 243; and the Houston Post, August 23, 1891.
in which all classes would receive compensation for labor performed on the basis of skill, intelligence, frugality and industry. He equated justice with equal opportunity:

The demand which labor makes is, not that it be fed by the charity of government or individuals, but that it be given fair opportunities to exert itself; that social and economic conditions be so adjusted that every laboring man will find...that he can hold in his firm and honest grasp all of the fruits of his labor. 64

The ultimate sources of value for the farmers were God and nature. The course of his life was determined by divine sanction and natural harmony. It was God who had placed man on earth and set nature in motion. The belief in the superiority of agrarian life had its origin in God's admonition to Adam to subdue the earth. Land was a gift of God to man, and man was under obligation to till the soil. The evangelical tradition reinforced the farmer's awareness that he was in constant touch with the divine. His special political and spiritual virtue was related to his unique contact with the forces of nature. This intimate contact was also the source of his sense of justice. Specific cultural symbols such as the idea of the South or the Democratic Party might become the tools of opposing factions in the community, but the final struggle was decided on the ideological battleground of religious conviction. Any political movement that sought the farmers' support had to have divine sanction.

64 Nugent, op. cit., pp. 222-3.
The economic condition of the Texas farmer was extremely difficult in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The problems of his everyday life, however, were not the only factors that produced his radical response. The values of his community were also in a state of flux, and that instability contributed to his discontent. The myth of agrarian life was faltering in its ability to explain a society whose relationships were becoming increasingly more complex. The primacy of the farmer in the social structure was no longer taken for granted. The continued decline in his economic condition weakened his faith in traditional institutions, such as the Democratic Party, to provide for his welfare. His sense of justice was offended by the apparent decline in economic opportunity at the hands of the railroads and middlemen. His religion seemed to require that society change its course to restore justice, and his religious leaders became the advocates of economic and political heresy. The network of forces affecting the farmer's life seemed to become more tangled and contradictory as time went by. The farmer was ready for a new direction.
CHAPTER THREE

The Ideology of the Texas Populists

I. The Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party

The Populist impulse in Texas took many organizational forms. The term "Populist" includes the Alliance and the People's Party in its most common application, but these movements in Texas reveal a direct link to earlier Granger and Greenback movements. The membership and leaders had a strong tendency to overlap between the earlier and later movements. For example, Jerome C. Kearby, the People's Party candidate for governor in 1896, had been active in the Greenback Party, the Union Labor Party, the Anti-Monopoly Party and the Alliance before actively supporting the People's Party.

The Grange had reached its most active phase in Texas between 1875 and 1878, holding to a strictly nonpartisan position and limiting its activity to cooperative buying and selling and improving the social life of its members. The Greenback Party became the spokesman for the Texas farmer after the Granger's nonpartisan petitions on the currency inflation issue failed to produce results. The Greenbackers never seriously challenged Democratic power in the state and did not put up candidates after 1884.

The Alliance had its origin in Lampasas County in 1875. The farmers had banded together to catch horse thieves and strays,

and to purchase supplies collectively. The first group died out, but one of its members reorganized the movement in Parker county in 1879. The Grand State Alliance was chartered as a "secret and benevolent association" in 1880, and by 1885 claimed to have 50,000 members. The rapid growth of the Alliance after 1885 made it an important political factor in Texas within a year. 66

The Texas Alliance had posed as a social organization in the early years of its history, but the business and political interests of the group came to the surface in the state convention at Cleburne in 1886. The resolutions adopted by the convention included the traditional endorsement of education for the agricultural classes, moral behavior and social cooperation within the community, and a nonpartisan course for the movement. The body also adopted a set of demands that included prohibition of alien ownership of land, an interstate commerce law, and inflation of the currency. These "political" demands came under fire from a group that wanted the Alliance to take an economic direction. They called for the establishment of a business plan that would enable farmers to pool economic resources in order to function in the market as a single unit. They predicted that the farmers of Texas could save a million dollars a year under such a system. The potential divisiveness of the situation was avoided by the skill of C. W. Macune, the new chairman of the executive committee. Under his direction the movement pursued its political goals through a vigorous program of expansion through

66 Hicks, op. cit., pp. 104-5; and Saloutos, op. cit., p. 72.
out the South, while organizing an Exchange within the state to satisfy the business interests. 67

The Alliance began to exert a visible pressure on the Democratic Party in Texas after 1886. Concessions to the farmer appeared in the Democratic platform of 1888, and in 1890 they nominated James S. Hogg in an obvious gesture of sympathy for the farmer's problems. Hogg ran on the issue of creating a state railroad regulatory commission, but the platform of 1890 also contained planks calling for abolition of national banks and the free and unlimited coinage of silver. Hogg was elected with the support of Alliance men, Grangers, and the Knights of Labor. The farmers had been kept out of third party politics, and Governor Hogg enjoyed a honeymoon of several months while a railroad commission was created, an alien land law passed, and laws regulating public and private securities and convict labor were approved. 68

The decision of the Texas Farmers to embark on a policy of third party politics was the result of both unfulfilled political promises and political infighting. In the fifteen year period between 1875 and 1890 most native Texans were Democrats by force of circumstances, but each new wave of reform drew off another segment of Democratic solidarity. The Confederate tradition on the one hand demanded party loyalty, but on the other it counseled rebellion against tyrannical authority. As the condition of the farmer either


declined or remained the same over the years he gradually came to look upon his political leaders with distrust. The first People's Party in Texas was organized under the direction of Thomas Gaines in Comanche County. The drought of 1886 brought the greatest poverty to that agricultural community that it had ever known or would ever experience in the future. The farmers called for mass meetings in the school districts to take control from the political "bosses." The "Human" Party, as it was labeled by the Democrats, took control of the county. Erath county had a similar experience in 1886, and in 1888 third parties were organized in Lampasas, Robertson, Navarro, and Red River counties.

Agrarian third party movements appeared throughout the state between 1886 and 1890, but the leaders of the Alliance managed to keep most of the organized farmers out of politics. An Anti-monopoly convention was held in 1886, and a convention of Farmers, Laborers, and Stock Raisers, a convention of the Union Labor Party, and a nonpartisan convention were held in 1888. The nonpartisans nominated Evan Jones, the President of the State Alliance, for governor, but he refused the nomination. The concessions of the Democrats to the farmers in 1890 temporarily retarded the growth of agrarian third parties, but problems reappeared in 1891.

Governor Hogg met many of the farmers' demands, but he was soon under the attack of the Alliance legislative committee led by Harry Tracy. The committee criticized the appointive feature


of the new railroad commission, and was outraged when the governor failed to appoint S. D. A. Duncan, an Alliance man, to one of the positions on the commission. At the same time that troubles were developing in Texas, C. W. Macune, from his position as editor of the Southern Alliance's National Economist in Washington, D. C., began to push the Texas Democrats in Congress to sponsor his sub-treasury plan. Senator Reagan wrote to Hogg that the Democrats "ought to throw Macune and his set overboard" because they were breaking up the party. The issue came to a head in March, 1891, with the issuance of the "Austin Manifesto" by a group of Alliance men who supported Governor Hogg and opposed Macune and Tracy. This event marked the beginning of the split between anti-subtreasury Alliance men and the subtreasury Alliance men. 71

The anti-subtreasury faction proceeded to organize the Grand State Farmers' Alliance which would follow a strictly non-political course. They rejected all forms of economic heresy, and were in agreement with the conservative policies of the Grange. Grangers saw their organization as an "impregnable bulwark against the communistic, and socialistic and the agrarian heresies" that were abroad in the agricultural community. The two organizations in Texas effected a merger in May, 1893. 72

71 Cotner, James Stephen Hogg, pp. 248, 250-254; and a letter from John H. Reagan to James S. Hogg, November 16, 1890, Hogg Papers (Typescript copy at Rice University.)

72 Ralph Smith, "The Grange in Texas": p. 307; and The Proceedings of the Twenty-Fourth Session of the National Grange, Atlanta, Georgia, 1890 (Philadelphia: J. A. Wagenseller, 1890), p. 60.
Macune, when questioned about the possibility of a third party for farmers following the "Austin Manifesto", replied that it depended "altogether on how the people are treated by the Democratic Party." The subtreasury Alliance men endorsed the Macune plan and the Ocala Demands at their regular convention in August, 1891. The Democrats were faced with the problem of compromising on matters involving economic heresy or forcing the organized farmers into a third party position. They decided that a good Democrat could not be a subtreasury man. In the "Cole Incident" and in a statement by the State Democratic Executive Committee, they made this point clear: an Alliance man could not be a Democrat. Good Democrats who were also Alliance members responded by organizing the "Jeffersonian Democrats" early in 1892. This rump Democratic Party had 70,000 members and was subsequently drawn into the People's Party.73

The People's Party of Texas was born of economic distress and political intrigue and it possessed the characteristics of both parents. The People's Party, however, was not simply a collection of old organizations and programs. It made its own distinctive contribution to political life in Texas. The local unit of the Alliance and the People's Party in Texas was the club. If the doors were closed for its meetings, it was the Alliance. If the doors were open for its meetings, it was the People's Party. For all practical purposes the organizations were identical in Texas after

73 Interview with C. W. Macune, Dallas Morning News, March 8, 1891; Cotner, James Stephen Hogg, pp. 261-266; and Martin, People's Party, pp. 36-45. The "Cole Incident" involved the expulsion of W. H. Cole, an Alliance man and a Democrat, from the Democratic Party by the Dallas County Democratic Executive Committee in October, 1891.
1891. The club served both a social and a political function in the community; entertainment and parties were as familiar to the halls as was political discussion. There was a hierarchy of county and state offices above the local club, but it was the main unit of Populist strength. The organizational strength of the Populists was one of the reasons that they posed a serious threat to an entrenched, but loosely organized Democratic Party in Texas. The sponsorship of glee clubs, the Young People's Reform League of Texas, and the Home Industry Club Association prepared young people for later political activity, while the martial appeal of the Industrial Legion and Gideon's Band strengthened the ties of their elders to the party. 74

The appeal of the People's Party was broader than that of earlier farm organizations. There was a genuine attempt to bring the laborer into the party. The Populists maintained that economic self-interest transcended race. They made open appeals to the German community, and, most alarming of all, they attempted to fit the Negro into their coalition. The State Convention in 1891 named two Negroes to the executive committee and Negroes served on the committee until 1900. Historians have suggested that the Populists courted disaster when they sought the Negro vote, because no group in the South had stronger feelings on race than the small white farmer. The Populist appeal for direct government action, however, found a sympathetic audience in the Negro community. "Negroes became committed

74 Ibid, pp. 146-150, 155-158; and Southern Mercury, April 2, 1896.
very early to a policy of federal control and extension of federal power—a point of view from which they did not depart throughout the nineteenth century. In addition to the ideological position of the Negroes, they also accounted for 22 percent of the state's population in 1890.

Despite the broad appeal of the Populist movement, its success was limited to a homogeneous group of white, Protestant, marginal farmers. The attempt to win the urban laborer was a failure. The Populists had the support of organized labor, but few laborers were organized in Texas in the 1890's. The Populists never carried an election in a significant urban region of the state. The prosperous farmer was also immune to the Populist impulse. The rich agricultural regions of the state remained the stronghold of the Democratic Party throughout the nineties. Populists made headway only in regions where large-scale farming in fertile black lands was impossible and where the drought had taken its toll. The division in political affiliation and prosperity followed this same pattern even within individual counties. The only other agricultural interests in the party were the sheepmen who were suffering from falling wool prices after the removal of tariff protection under Cleveland. The attempts to win foreign elements of the population and Negro voters were also failures. The Populists showed their greatest strength in regions where there

were neither Negroes nor foreigners; and in regions where these groups were predominant they usually polled fewer votes than either Democrats or Republicans. 76

The Populist coalition did not measure up to the hopes of its leaders for a broad social base beneath the party structure, but it did attract many elements that created problems for the party. The People's Party, despite the efforts of its leaders, enveloped the Prohibition movement. Socialists, woman suffragettes, and members of the American Protective Association all tried to win over the party to their own ends with varying degrees of success. The close ties of the movement with religion made it particularly susceptible to the Prohibitionists and the A. P. A., but the People's Party, at least in its formal statements, avoided a rigid position on these issues. The Texas Populists were a religious people and demanded a "Christian" program, but they were not troubled by factional strife or sectarian warfare. 77

The leadership of the Texas Populists was drawn primarily from the ranks of disenchanted professionals. In a group of nine important leaders of the Texas movement, there were four lawyers, two teachers, two farmers, and one minister. The farmer himself was often too busy to be bothered with the details of administering a political movement, and he depended on a small group of professionals to take care of that problem. Texas seems to have followed the pattern that Hofstadter found in the national movement.

77 Ibid., pp. 80-88. There was some evidence of anti-Catholic feeling among marginal farmers, but leaders of the various protestant sects functioned within the movement with a minimum of friction.
Farmers did not draw their leaders from their own ranks, but from "a ragged elite of professional men, rural editors, third-party veterans, and professional reformers...." 78

Charles W. Macune was the most important early leader of the Texas farmers. His skill preserved the structure of the Alliance in 1886. He was born in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in 1851, and before arriving in Texas in 1871 had lived in Illinois, California, and Kansas. He practiced law in Milam County, and hearing that Georgetown would be on a railroad route, he leased a hotel there, but the depression of 1873 stopped construction on the line. This event seems to have been the trigger that set Macune looking for solutions to larger economic problems. He studied medicine and pharmacy for a few years, but in 1885 he joined the Alliance and rapidly rose within the organization to head its executive committee by 1886. He organized the Farmers' Alliance Exchange and was responsible for the combination of the Agricultural Wheel and the Alliance that produced the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union. He became editor of the National Economist, the official organ of the Southern Alliance, in 1889, and from that position introduced the subtreasury scheme in 1890. Macune was discredited in 1892 when it was revealed that he had aided the Democrats in publishing documents designed to induce Alliance men to vote the Democratic ticket. 79


Macune's career includes some characteristic patterns that were true of most Texas farm leaders. The most important aspect of his career was his flexibility. He was always seeking new solutions to the problems of the farmer. One program was hardly underway before he was proposing a new idea; after trying cooperation for several years and finding it insufficient, he turned to the subtreasury plan. He was not wedded to a single organization for the farmers. He personally directed several organizational shifts in the movement.

Macune's personal misfortune in the depression of the 1870's was common to at least two other prominent leaders. Although these events may not have produced the turn to reform, they seem to have served as a catalyst in the lives of these individuals.

The one qualification of a Populist leader in Texas that Macune did not have was a distinguished record of service for the Confederacy. Two of the gubernatorial candidates of the Populists had such records. Thomas L. Nugent had served with distinction and Jerome C. Kearby was called the "boy soldier" because he claimed to have been the youngest enlistee in the Civil War. Kearby was also flexible in his political career. He was a lawyer whose twenty-five years of dissent included affiliation with the Greenback, Union Labor, Anti-Monopoly and People's parties. Thomas Nugent was the most thorough political theorist among the Texas leaders. Populism provided the political expression of a kind of social gospel movement for Nugent. He was certainly bound by no particular program for the farmer; he sought a new morality to fit new relationships. Having been influenced by Swedenborgian philosophy, Nugent rejected any rigid institutional arrangements and looked for a gradual working
out of the Second Coming through social reform. He was willing to support any program that would further this process. 80

Nugent and Kearby were the statesmen of the movement, but the work of organizing and spreading the Populist faith was done most effectively by James H. Davis, H. S. P. Ashby and John B. Rayner. These three leaders traveled back and forth across the state during the nineties. "Cyclone" Davis was a young lawyer who had a reputation as the finest stump speaker in the state by 1890. The panic of 1873 had deprived Davis of a college education and convinced him that panics were inherent in the existing system. He joined the Grange at age 18, and continued an active role in agrarian politics through the nineties. "Stump" Ashby was also a vigorous organizer for the People's Party. After service in the Confederate army, Ashby attempted farming and school teaching, but he found his place riding an old roan pony as a circuit preacher to the outposts of Christianity in Navarro, Limestone and Freestone counties. Ashby was second only to Davis on the speaker's platform where he preached the gospel of universal emancipation to liberate the minds and bodies of men. He described himself as a preacher of "politics during the week and religion on Sunday." John B. Rayner was born a slave in North Carolina in 1850, but he obtained a college education following the Civil War and tried his hand at teaching and being a deputy sheriff. After coming to Texas in 1881, he attempted teaching and preaching and soon became involved in politics. Rayner saw Populism as an

opportunity for the Negro to advance and became the movement's most active organizer and orator. 81

The orators and organizers of the Populist movement were supported by a group of what may be called executive or managerial leaders. Harry Tracy, Milton Park, and Evan Jones were unfailing workers for the party although they seldom shared the publicity of the gubernatorial candidates or the orators of the movement. Harry Tracy returned from the Civil War to take up farming in Texas. By 1885, Tracy had established himself to such an extent that he turned over the care of his farm to a younger brother and went into the field as an Alliance lecturer. He was a key figure in the formation of the "Jeffersonian Democrat" movement and then became a leader in the People's Party. Tracy's gift was in executive work and he was responsible for much of the organizational strength of the party in election years. He was also an effective lobbyist for the movement.

Milton Park served with distinction for the Confederacy. He was a teacher and the head of a Baptist seminary before becoming involved in agrarian politics. He served as editor of the Southern Mercury during the crucial transition from Alliance "demands" to People's Party politics. He also served for several years as chairman of the Populist National Executive Committee. Evan Jones was

the only true farmer among the leaders of the Texas farmers' movement. He served as President of the State Alliance for several years, and slowly came to accept the policies of third party politics.82

The Texas farmer depended on a small group of professional men to direct his organizations. The leaders that emerged were sensitive to the farmer's discontent, and they were willing to attempt various programs to bring relief. The leadership functioned with a reasonable amount of internal cooperation and compromise. They were continually looking for new ideas and programs, and they carried on a vigorous debate of these various alternatives both in public and in private. Their words and activity gave the farmer a sense of direction and community at a time when social and economic relationships seemed to be disintegrating all around him.

II. The Plan for Action

The program of agrarian revolt in Texas was not wedded to a single principle. The fluid character of the Populist proposals created an atmosphere of experimentation. The organizations of the farmer would support a program until its principles found expression in law, were adopted by the Democratic Party, or proved unworkable. Once a program fell into one of these conditions, the Populists turned to new ideas. In this way, the Texas Populists were able

to function as the cutting edge of reform in the state during the nineties. Beginning with the Cleburne demands in 1886, the Populists proposed a series of reform measures that helped to shape Texas politics.

The ideological process produces a plan for action that ordinarily conforms to the existing society, but the third party situation created a special role for the plan. When hope of victory is limited, the plan for action may provide an educational tool. By stressing the probable or the potential over the hard facts of reality, the plan became a tool for informing the community about the possibilities of reform. The orator's abstract ideas took on new force when they were linked to a specific proposal. Thomas Nugent realized that his candidacy for the governorship had little chance of success, but he pursued it as an opportunity to educate the masses. 83

The proponents of each succeeding Populist plan described their own solution as a panacea for the farmer's ills, but this label belongs to the field of rhetoric, and should be seen as primarily a tactical device to stimulate enthusiasm. This is not to say that they did not expect great benefits to flow from the implementation of their programs, but they were not unaware of the rhetorical value of a panacea. The Galveston Daily News suggested that "the grand party of the people has made its start under the manipulation of vote catchers, to trim and straddle and lure votes...." 84

83 Nugent, op. cit., p. 15. Nugent's wife maintained that he "considered the canvass hopeless except for its educational effects upon the people...."

84 Galveston Daily News, June 23, 1894. For a discussion of Populist symbol manipulation see ibid, June 22, 23, 1894.
fact that the Texas Populists refused to adopt any program, even
the free silver solution, as orthodoxy indicates that the movement
was not tied to a single program.

The main effort of the Farmers' Alliance in the mid-
eighties was in the field of cooperation. Cooperative buying was
not new to Texas in 1885. The Grange had been operating the Texas
Cooperative Association out of Galveston since 1878. The Grange
cooperative had failed to take advantage of the lower cost of goods
brought by the newly completed railroad system, and continued to
buy its goods in Galveston. It operated on the cash system of the
Rochdale Plan, and in the drought of 1886 the Patrons from West
Texas demanded credit to see them through the crisis. The Alliance
responded by setting up cooperatives in the local sub-Alliances
in which the members made joint notes to cover the cost of equipment
and supplies necessary for the next year. This makeshift arrange-
ment was replaced by County Farmers' Alliance Cooperative Associations
and the Cooperative Manufacturing Alliance of Texas early in 1887.
A factory site at Marble Falls was purchased for the purpose of even-
tually processing cotton and woolen goods. Stock in local coopera-
tive stores was put up for sale to Alliance members at five dollars
a share on a cash basis. 85

Macune realized that these disjointed efforts would not
improve the position of the farmer in the market, so he proposed

and Ralph Smith, "Macuncism! or the Farmers of Texas in
225-226.
A comprehensive plan for the Farmers' Alliance Exchange of Texas in August, 1887. The plan established a central exchange in Dallas and authorized the exchange to sell farm produce, livestock, and real property of the Alliance. The exchange was to purchase all commodities required by the farmer and build warehouses for storage. During the twenty months that the exchange was in business it attempted to strengthen the farmers' position in the market by a process of market quotation and standard classification. The local buyer was bypassed because the exchange guaranteed the quality and delivery of cotton and had immediate information on rising prices. The cooperatives failed because of poor management and credit problems. Crops were already mortgaged, and noteholders determined their disposition regardless of changing market conditions. The exchange handled its own credit operations, and by March 1888, notes exceeded capital three to one. Banks refused to honor exchange paper, and the exchange was soon headed for financial ruin.

The failure of the exchange set Macune on a search for different economic solutions that would result in the proposal of the subtreasury plan, but there were other marketing proposals before the Alliance in the interim. The economic proposals of the Texas farmers indicate a realization that the key to their prosperity lay in the international market. They were continually exploring new methods to improve their position in world trade. A convention on the question of a deep water port on the Gulf of Mexico in 1888 stimulated a great deal of interest in the pages of the Southern Mercury.

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36 Ibid, pp. 233-233; Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 135-137; and Garvin and Daws, op. cit, pp. 63-77.
The Democratic Party included an endorsement of the plan in their state platform of 1888, but the Alliance added a new twist to the idea in the nineties. The following letter appeared in the Southern Mercury on November 20, 1890:

Great railway systems build great cities
and create great states and great peoples.
Without them deep water anywhere is a delusion....

I want to see great systems of continental and international railways standing with their most important terminus on our gulf shore, and running north and northwest instead of east and northeast....

The farmers developed this idea into a plank of the People's Party state platform in 1892. They suggested that all convict labor be employed in building double track railroads, to be owned and operated by the state, from the "deepest water on the Gulf to the most eligible point on Red River and other similar roads." They also endorsed the building of a Nicaraguan canal in their 1894 platform to further strengthen their trading position.87

Macune's search for a solution for the Southern farmers' problems led him to first suggest a secret binding union of all cotton producers that would give them the power to go on strike so

87 Southern Mercury, November 20, 1890; Winkler, op. cit., pp. 263-5, 299, 332-334. The use of convict labor was acceptable because the building of a state-owned railroad would presumably not involve citizen labor. The labor plank of the platform required only that "convict labor be taken out of competition with citizen labor."
that they could force the merchants and bankers to accede to their demands. When this proposal met with little enthusiasm he proposed the subtreasury plan. The details of the plan varied from time to time but it basically involved the establishment of government warehouses in counties producing $300,000 worth of wheat, cotton, corn, oats and tobacco annually. The farmer was to be given legal tender up to 80 percent of the value of his commodities in storage at an interest rate of 2 percent per year. The farmer would receive the balance of his payment by selling his product at peak market values during the year. The plan was to have the dual effect of increasing the supply of money at harvest time when it was usually scarce and granting the farmer credit at a low rate of interest. Critics charged that the plan would produce wholesale inflation, subject the farmer to speculators, and penalize the small farmer. They also accused the farmers of promoting class legislation. The following diagram appeared in the Southern Mercury to illustrate the subtreasury principle:

The subtreasury plan was one of the few agrarian proposals that the Democrats in Texas were unable to absorb in one form or another. They branded the proposal as the worst kind of political heresy. The People's Party in Texas proposed its own local version of the subtreasury plan in 1891. They called for an "amendment of our state constitution authorizing the loaning of our permanent
school fund not otherwise invested upon the lands of the people of this state at a low rate of interest, with proper limitations upon the quantity of land and the amount of money." This proposal had a precedent in Texas because the state had been loaning these funds for railroad construction, but the Democrats labeled the plan "the rankest kind of socialism." The Houston Post rejected the Populists and called for total war:

It is strange indeed that in this day and generation such idiotic schemes as the sub-treasury and land loan follies should receive a moment's toleration from sensible reflecting men....

From this point on it should be 'war to the knife and knife to the hilt' against such nonsense held out as a glittering bribe by unprincipled demagogues.

Although the Democrats had split into two factions in 1892, they united to condemn "communism and state socialism" as well as "the existing war upon the rights of property in this state." 89

The Texas Democrats found the subtreasury heresy too much to endure, but most of the farmers' proposals were incorporated into the orthodoxy of the Democratic platform in the nineties. The Cleburne demands of the Alliance had called, among other things, for an alien land law, restrictions on dealing in futures, the elimination of national banks, issuance of legal tender notes by the

89 Winkler, op. cit., pp. 297, 320, 324; and the Houston Post, July 14, 1891.
Treasury, full coinage of silver and gold, and the elimination of convict labor. Following this declaration in 1886, the Democrats proceeded to incorporate these ideas, in whole or in part, into their program. The restriction of alien land ownership became a plank in the Democratic state platform in 1890, and in 1891 an alien land law was signed by Governor Hogg. The platform of 1892 contained a strongly worded plank on the restriction of dealing in futures. A qualified rejection of the national banking system in the 1888 platform was replaced by the following plank in 1890: "We are opposed to the continuance of the National banking system, and demand the abolishment thereof as soon as by law the same can be done." The 1890 platform also contained a call for the free and unlimited coinage of silver which was strengthened in 1896. The elimination of convict labor was endorsed by the Democrats in 1892.90

In addition to accepting the majority of the Cleburne demands, the Texas Democrats made concessions to later Populist proposals. The Alliance was a leader in the support for the railroad commission that was established in 1891. Despite the dissatisfaction the farmer had with the appointive commission, the passage of the law represented a victory for agrarian forces. A strong point in the 1888 demands of the Alliance condemning the formulation of trusts and monopolies was matched by a vigorous Democratic plank on the subject in 1890. The Democrats also passed significant legislation under Governor Hogg establishing guidelines for incorporation.

and limiting trusts. The Populists proposed to improve the democratic process by having direct elections for the President, Vice-President and United States Senators in 1888. The Democrats endorsed the direct election of Senators in 1896. Finally, the Populists proposed the imposition of an income tax in 1891. The Democrats were willing to endorse such a measure for federal purposes in their platform of 1892.91

The process of assimilation by the Democrats left the agrarian radicals with little they could call their own. By the time of the fusionist efforts in 1896, the only major demands of the Texas Populists that were either unfulfilled or unadopted by the Democrats were the recognition of organized labor, some special forms of land reform, and government ownership of the railroads. Government ownership was put in the same category as the subtreasury plan by the critics of Populism. This was the worst kind of socialism. Government ownership was the attempt of the farmer to break up what he believed to be the "unholy, unjust, un-American, undemocratic, un-Republican combination between corporate greed and judicial usurpation." The true Democrat responded by applying the label of socialism to such a plan.92

The greatest threat to the Populist movement in Texas was absorption by the reform wing of the Democratic Party. The election of 1892 involved a multi-party struggle: the reform Democrats, the


92 Davis, Political Revelation, p. 199.
conservative Democrats, the "Lily-white" Republicans, and the Populists all had candidates in the field. The function of the party was altered. Seymour Lipset suggests that parties in this situation seek to win support from a limited base by stressing the cleavages which set it apart from other groups. "The party's function as a representative of a group is separated from the function of integrating the group in the body politic..." The emergence of a new Democratic coalition in 1894 posed a new danger of assimilation to the Populists. If the Democrats had succeeded, discussion of the farmers' problems would have been swallowed up in the internal workings of the party. The task of integrating the Populists into the body politic was performed admirably by the Democratic Party; survival of the Populists was dependent on their ability to produce a program that would distinguish them from the Democrats.

The People's Party of Texas was left with only the most radical elements of its program after 1896. Most of its demands had become law or part of the Democratic orthodoxy. It may be argued that the adoption of agrarian principles by the Democratic Party in Texas was not simply a response to the demands of agrarian radicals, but the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party were in the vanguard of the reform impulse that dominated Texas politics in the early nineties. The political life of Texas was profoundly influenced by the third-party pressure of the Populists.

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III. The Populist Rhetoric

Rhetoric performs the function of persuasion in the ideological process. It preserves cultural myths and translates dynamic social values into political action. Appeals to group symbols extend group energy to support new ideological programs. Rhetoric is not inherently either deceptive or irrational; it is functional. Kenneth Burke finds the origins of rhetoric "in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols." The orator does not convert issues into ideological problems or invest them with moral color and emotional content as Daniel Bell has charged. The issues of political conflict in human society are born into a world of moral coloration and emotional charge.94

Populist rhetoric was a rhetoric of crisis. The St. Louis platform of 1892 proclaimed that "we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin." The vision of a community in crisis was also common to the rhetoric of Texas spokesmen for the farmer. The sense of community had been lost. Growing numbers of farmers began to see themselves as outsiders; the familiar symbols of security were threatened. The guiding principles of the community had been lost. "We are rapidly drift-

ing from the moorings of our fathers, and stand today in the crucial era of our free institutions, of our free form of government, and of our Christian civilization."\textsuperscript{95}

The violent events of the early nineties convinced the Texas farmer that the nation was rapidly being divided into two camps for a final struggle. Thomas Nugent, although rejecting its violence, described the Pullman strike as a genuine social conflict: "Capital—organized, arrogant, intrenched in special privileges and inspired by confidence born of recent victories—stands confronted by labor, smarting under defeat, alert, resentful, holding its lines till the fateful hours shall come." The Populists were not content to describe a simple dualistic social struggle. They seldom described the class conflict without evidence; they described in detail how "one-twentieth of one percent of our population own three-fifths of the entire wealth of the country." The lines of battle were being drawn between the very rich and the very poor.\textsuperscript{96}

The justice of existing institutions was questioned by the Populists. They had a feeling that government was beyond their influence and that laws were imposed to exploit the poorer classes. The first People's Party platform in Texas, adopted in August, 1891, described the increasing frustration and decreasing confidence of the farmer:

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[95]{Hicks, Populist Revolt, p. 436; and Southern Mercury, December 18, 1890.}
\footnotetext[96]{Nugent, op. cit., pp. 179, 181.}
\end{footnotes}
They (the existing parties) have loaned the money to banks, expositions, and railroads but refuse such relief to the producer. They have built warehouses for the importer's merchandise and the whiskey men's spirits, National parks for the pleasure seeking usurer and speculator, costly Federal buildings to enhance real estate values in many cities, but refuse to accommodate the producer with a warehouse, by which he can paralyze the damning influences of speculators and shylocks. They have loaned money for various purposes and now find it wrong to assist the debt, mortgage, and usury ridden people of this country, who, under the guise of freemen, are shivering in the wintry blasts of poverty and fast approaching the crisis which all free nations before us have come to--national decay and loss of national manhood.97

The language of moral crusade was the obvious vehicle for an ideology of crisis. In a time of shifting cultural values, religious images provided effective unifying symbols for a political movement. Mention has already been made of the religious fervor and moral enthusiasm of the Populist camp meetings. The evangelistic tradition had educated many Populist leaders to be expert agitators. They knew the methods of crowd manipulation and produced an enthusiastic mass response. The language of the Populists was not artificial; however, in their zealous devotion to principles, "they gave the movement the appearance of a great religious crusade."98

97 Winkler, op. cit., pp. 293-295.
Populist orators who had been circuit preachers and evangelistic leaders had the instruments of persuasion at their command. Enthusiastic religion was not unlike enthusiastic politics, and the preacher was the first to recognize this. Henry Ward Beecher cautioned against an "attempt to excite in a community or in a church a very wide-spread, deep, and general moral excitement while the whole community is burning and blazing with political excitement; because you cannot have two such excitements at the same time...." Beecher included this admonition in a series of lectures on preaching published in 1881. Being one of the foremost evangelical preachers of the day, his comments may be viewed as a general statement of revivalist technique. He suggested that intellectual argument should be joined by appeals to emotion, imagination and prejudice. The preacher must be a student of human nature and appeal to the particular values of his listeners. "There are certain states of mind of transcendent importance in preaching," Beecher maintained, "which never come to a preacher except when he stands at the focal point of his audience and feels their concentrated sympathy." Both the Populist orator and his audience had been trained to respond to this situation.

The speeches and writings of the Populists were filled with religious images and scriptural references. Nugent often referred to Jesus Christ as the first great reformer: "Christ stood forth in that olden time as the redeemer and glorifier of labor, as the Divine King of industry...." Cyclone Davis' suggestion that "the

Bible is our model" describes the content of much of the Populist oratory. The first session of the 1894 People's Party convention was opened with a prayer that declared that "God is with the Populists in their efforts to regain their liberty and escape from the bondage in which they had been placed."100

The object of the agrarian crusade was conspiracy. Money power, the monopoly and the railroad were in an unholy alliance that the moral crusade of the farmers sought to destroy. The farmer saw himself as a victim in the hands of a "foreign and eastern oligarchy," a "conspiracy of tyrants." One had only to look at history to see the deliberate contraction of currency by the federal government and the alarming number of business failures at the hands of Wall Street speculators. Populists recognized that "agreements among gentlemen" might be considered within the law, but they chose to call these combinations conspiracies because the sole aim of the participants, in their eyes, was to filch the masses. The conspiracy label was a convenient way to "teach the masses to regard those who in their methods disregard justice and equity, as moral lepers...." The conspiracy approach was another way of explaining that society was fundamentally out of balance. Nugent maintained that "the spirit of plutocratic capitalism is the dominating force in our organized social and industrial life." The entire social structure needed reform.101

100 Nugent, op. cit., p. 169; Davis, Political Revelation, p. 5; and Galveston Daily News, June 21, 1894.

101 Davis, Political Revelation, p. 273; Southern Mercury, August 21, 1886; and Nugent, op. cit., p. 183.
The Texas Populists worked within an ideology of crisis. Their chiliastic and apocalyptic vision led them to describe late nineteenth-century American society in terms of a great conspiracy against the farmer. This technique, in and of itself, however, did not mean that Populism was sour and illiberal as Hofstadter has suggested. It remains to be asked what function this rhetorical device performed. It is in the nature of rhetoric that it should confront an enemy: "Since persuasion so often implies the presence or threat of an adversary, there is the 'antagonist' or competitive stress." The Populist campaigner made full use of his religious frame of reference and his evangelical bent. He called for "a commitment to do battle with the forces of light against the powers of darkness." The apocalyptic image was an effective call to action, but it was not a call for revolution. While the farmer, on the one hand, might describe his movement as "a gigantic wave of world wide movement of the race" that was "shaking today, the very foundations of the civilization of the nineteenth century," he cautioned, on the other hand, that his movement could "only hope to achieve a victory worthy of the name by strictly peaceable and orderly methods." The fear of an impending disaster became an effective tool of pressure politics in the hand of the Populist orator. The chiliastic language of his appeal served to unify the deeply religious marginal farmers, while, at the same time, it activated the common fear of social upheaval in the urban community. The Houston Post ran head- 

lines daily during the summer of 1891 on the state militia in training, and a feature article on mob control maintained that "artillery is most effectual for cleaning streets," and that a "mob once broken should be kept on the move until every man, woman and child has reached his or her home or been arrested by the police..." The Populist discussion of an impending apocalypse functioned as a threat of mob violence to wring concessions from urban Democrats.

The conspiracy theory provided a unifying force in the agricultural community. Coming at the end of a twenty-five year period of economic decline for the farmer, the Populist movement could provide him with an object for his frustration and suggest a simplified division of society between the exploiters and the exploited. Populist leaders were willing to use the symbolic value of language as a means to the end of social cohesion within the farmers' movement. A critic described the manipulation of language by the People's Party in these terms: "It bids for the support of the citizens of given convictions without employing the terms which have become scare words under the manipulation of their hostile critics."104

The ability of Populist leaders to exploit political symbols did not involve any lack of belief in conspiracy on their part. Their use of the concept did not eliminate their genuine fears about the future of society. "The other and more dangerous snag is to be found in the radicalism which may be evolved from among the brethren.

103 Southern Mercury, January 1, 1891; and Houston Post, July 24, 1891. For a discussion of the common fear of the apocalypse see C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History, pp. 158-60.

104 Galveston Daily News, June 22, 1891.
as they grasp the enormity of the crimes which are daily perpetrated against them...." This editorial in the Southern Mercury in 1888 indicated that there were limits to the use of the conspiracy symbols by Populists. C. W. Macune, sensing the dangers of excessive radicalism, suggested that if the order meant anything at all it meant "justice, right, law and order, and therefore must be the very antipode of all forms of anarchy, both avowed and disguised." A constant tension existed within the movement between the farmers' role as a conservative citizen and his role as a member of a revolutionary crusade.

The conspiracy against the farmer was also described as one of values. The spiritual values of agrarian life were being threatened by the crass materialism of the urban industrialism. Not only had the "remorseless princes" of the land surrounded themselves in kingly splendor by reducing the productive masses to a condition of economic slavery, but they had perverted values as well. James Davis described the ill effects of the materialism of the rich in these terms:

The insidious poison of this example permeates every rank of life; it gives to cupidity abnormal force, excites extravagance in those unable to afford it, feeds a spirit of speculation and multiplies the victims of bankruptcy and suicide.


106 Davis, Political Revelation, pp. 111, 128, 246.
The function-oriented culture of the industrial city seemed to stress short run achievements rather than the lasting value of character. The mobility of the city appeared as a threat to lasting rural virtues in the farmer's opinion.

The rich perverted the values of society with a new materialism, but they also subverted the values of an earlier age in an attempt to justify their economic practices. Nugent described the perversion of Jeffersonian truths by a "crude generation" that "appropriated them only to the demands of an extreme, selfish individualism," but Nugent predicted that the People's Party in "the opening epoch will appropriate them to the demands of social and political justice." 107

The Texas Populists used the past more often as a critique of the present than as an ideal utopia. The leaders of the past had suggested the primary values of society, and history displayed the continuing conflict that the Populists found themselves involved in. Jefferson and Jackson were the central figures of authority in Populist rhetoric, and they were joined by Madison, Calhoun and Lincoln. The words of great men provided both eternal principles of right and criticism of existing institutions. To reinforce the agrarian myth, Jefferson's words on the virtues of the farmer were quoted: "farmers whose interests are entirely agricultural... are the true representatives of the great American interest, are alone to be relied on for expressing the proper American sentiments."

To attack trusts and monopolies, James Davis used Jefferson's opinion of corporate institutions: "we affirm to you that Jefferson looked

107 Nugent, op. cit., p. 177.
upon corporations as he looked upon royalty." Populists argued that the Constitution was the product of the forces of right triumphing over the monied interests. The provisions for a direct issue of currency to the people by Congress and government ownership of public transportation were won in a struggle that had continued through American history. Jackson's struggle against the banks was seen as the same kind of struggle that the People's Party waged against the giant corporations. The divisions of the Constitutional Convention continued to exist: "the East has done, through corporations, railroads and banks, just what it tried to make provision for doing through the Constitution." The old villains of the Federalist cause could be found among the politicians of the 1890's. "Cleveland is our Hamilton, and...Carlisle, Mills and most of all the leading Democrats have had their heads shorn by the harlot England." 108

Populists did not present a past utopia as the goal for the farmers' movement. They did not want to turn the clock back to an earlier agrarian age. They saw their ideal in the future, when social relations had been readjusted to allow the farmer to enjoy the benefits of an industrial society. Their call for government ownership of the railroads was not reactionary; they merely wanted what they understood to be an equal footing in the new economic order. Thomas Nugent expressed the Populist ideal in these words: "and what is redeemed society but redeemed and glorified industry?"

He condemned those reactionaries who "cling with death-like tenacity to social and political institutions long after they have ceased to

108 Davis, Political Revolution, pp. 179, 163, 156, 178.
be useful or serviceable to the human race—yes, long after they have become the instruments of injustice and oppression."

Ideas about the future were important to the Populists. They lived with the feeling that they were on the threshold of a new era. They understood that institutional arrangements in their society were shifting. W. Terrell, an Alliance lecturer, suggested that "the dawn is breaking and he (the farmer) now organizes for his own protection." C. W. Macune often reminded the farmer of the same trend: "the progress of material development has brought about such peculiar conditions in this day and time that to avoid organization is to refuse the benefits of enlightened cooperation...." He maintained that trusts and combines responded to no resistance except organization. Thomas Nugent described the forces at work that had produced the change in these words:

Gradually government became more and more complex and powerful as vast interests arose demanding something more than the simple functions of an agency for their protection.... The individual began to be merged into the corporation and society to separate itself into classes as special interests and privileges sprang into existence.

The Populist understood that his world was rapidly being transformed before his eyes. 110

110 Southern Mercury, July 12, 1888; Macune, President's Message, 1888, p. 2; and Nugent, op. cit., p. 170.
The Populist's sense that he was part of the new era, however, went beyond his understanding of institutional change. The *Southern Mercury* described the farmers' movement as a "movement of the masses" that was shaking the foundations of civilization. Farmers were part of "a gigantic wave" of a "world wide movement of the race." The first People's Party platform in Texas conveyed the sense of dramatic change in these words:

In view of the great social, industrial, and economic revolution now dawning upon the civilized world, and the new living issues confronting the American people, we believe that the time has now come for the crystallization of the political reform forces of our country.

The farmers saw themselves, in effect, as the bearers of the new age.

The goal in Populist rhetoric was the restoration of justice, and justice, in the farmer's eyes, was equality of opportunity. Populist orators framed their appeal in the terms of the old Jacksonian formula of "equal rights to all, special privileges to none," but it was not a naive formula. The Populists recognized that most economic measures imposed by government were "class legislation, and were so intended by those who enacted them...." They felt, however, that their program was one that "favors one class and at the same time benefits the public generally...."

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111 *Southern Mercury*, January 1, 1891; and Winkler, *op. cit.*, p. 295.
The responsibility for success and failure was still to rest squarely on the shoulders of the individual. The government assumed no new responsibility for the economic welfare of the citizen; it merely opened the door of economic opportunity for him. James Davis described the goal of the People's Party platform as the encouragement of "individual industry in the acquisition of property and the enjoyment of the same; establishing an aristocracy of industry, merit and honor, instead of an aristocracy of wealth, arrogance and idleness." Further evidence of the desire for opportunity rather than security is provided by a plank of the platform of 1894. Rather than calling for government aid to the unemployed, the party requested "amendment of the vagrant laws as will prevent the prosecution as criminals of industrious laboring men while in a condition of enforced idleness."  

The Texas Populists used the language of crisis in their rhetoric. Visions of the apocalypse and discussions of class conflict were common in their oratory. They appealed to the values of the agrarian community. References to the superiority of the farmer, the importance of his religion, and the clarity of his sense of justice pervaded the language of the Populists. The agrarian leaders convinced the farmer that he was part of a close-knit, holy crusade to rid the world of the evil conspiracy of the trust and monopoly. But they did not call for a radical change of existing institutions. They urged that a program of reform be instituted to restore justice to the market place. Their language often pushed at

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112 Tracy, op. cit., p. 333; Davis, Political Revelation, pp. 92-3; and Winkler, op. cit., p. 334.
the limits of existing institutions, but it did not become the rhetoric of violent revolution. Their program was sufficiently limited to be absorbed by the dominant party, and much of it later became law.
CHAPTER FOUR

An Evaluation of the Ideology of Texas Populism

An editorial in the Galveston Daily News in the summer of 1896 complained that the Democratic Party had been courting the votes of a "large watery-jointed and idiotic giant," the People's Party. The writer saw clearly that the Populists had scored tactical victories on both the national and local levels:

Wild as are its dreams, and they are as wild as the veriest nightmare, the democrats have harkened to them and adopted many of them. Crude as are their ideas that great old business party, the republican party, has sought an alliance.... 113

What the editor failed to understand was that the program of the Populists was neither wild nor idiotic. The reform program of the People's Party fit comfortably within the boundaries of America's larger social goals. Freedom and equality could hardly be described as un-American objectives. Frustration and tension in the farmer's economic situation and in his value system had produced an ideology of reform which found expression in the language of crisis.

The Texas farmer lived in a society of revolutionary change. The growth of the population and the economy shattered any stability

113 Galveston Daily News, August 9, 1896.
that might have prevailed in the agrarian community. The economic improvement of some groups in society stood in glaring contrast to the marginal farmers' static or declining position. Falling prices, restricted credit, and high marketing costs were coupled with a single crop agriculture, the restriction of open lands, and a serious drought. With increasing frequency, the farmer fell victim to the crop-lien system, high mortgage rates, and tenancy. He might have been able to withstand these setbacks if they had been temporary hardships, but the long decline in prices from 1873 to 1896 had a cumulative effect on the agricultural community. Frustration and despair became the common lot of the farmer; failure hung over his head as a constant threat to his security.

Objective changes in the economic situation of the farmer were no more important to Populism than the farmer's growing consciousness that his way of life was separated from that of the city-dweller by a widening cultural gap. He wanted to enjoy the benefits of industrialism and organization, but he was not sure that the values of the urban-industrial environment were worthy of appropriation. This growing sense of identity was a "process by means of which the rural populations acquire a more vivid consciousness of themselves and of their life-situations." It provided Populism with its most important cohesive force.

Texas Populists were free to emphasize the cleavages which set the farmer apart from society, because they had little hope of electoral victory. They saw themselves as educators of the masses and as spokesmen of an important pressure group acting on the Democratic Party. The call for a moral crusade against a conspiracy of the monied interests was the expression of a genuine belief in a social crisis. Nevertheless, it functioned as an extremely effective tool in marshaling the support of the marginal farmer. While the conspiracy theory performed a cohesive function within the movement, it would have been dysfunctional in the general political system. The proliferation of the conspiracy image might have seriously damaged the general consensus of the American political system. The call for a holy crusade reinforced the cultural myths of the agrarian community which saw the farmer as a superior political and spiritual being: he was the ideal crusader for truth and right. Religious values provided an unchanging standard of right against which all institutions and programs could be judged. Populism became the movement of righteousness.

Populist rhetoric rested on the assumption of the evangelistic technique: language was intended to be sermonic "because of its nature and of its intimacy with our feelings, it is always preaching." Populists practiced the art of total persuasion by appealing to the common values of the marginal farmer. The orator invoked the

115 Herbert Gutman has suggested that the contemporary labor movement used traditional religious values in a manner similar to Populism as "absolute values in a time of rapid social change...." Gutman, op. cit., p. 97.
the symbols of agrarian superiority, religious virtue, loyalty to
the South, and loyalty to the spirit of rebellion in the Confederacy.
He learned the techniques of mass enthusiasm; "by speech, gesture,
tonality, order, image, attitude, idea" he made his ways the ways
of his audience. 116

The dark side of Populist rhetoric was not absent from the
Texas scene. Nativism found its way onto the pages of the Southern
Mercury in the form of letters: "the worst and most dangerous part
of the population of the United States are foreigners...we want
neither Bohemians nor Chinamen...." Harry Tracy made rhetorical use
of anti-Semitism when he suggested that to reject the subtreasury
plan was "to defend Shylock and destroy the liberties of the people
and of their prosperity." Nativism and anti-Semitism appeared in Populist
rhetoric, but their incidence was rare and they never found expression
in programs. The Populists made frequent appeals to foreign groups
in Texas by special concessions in their program. Their support of
an alien land law was directed to a genuine economic problem rather
than against an ethnic or national group. 117

The suggestion that Populism was anti-urban and anti-labor
finds some application in Texas. Anti-urban and anti-labor feelings
among marginal farmers frequently came into conflict with programs
which sought the support of the urban laborer. While farmers deplored

116 Richard M. Weaver, Visions of Order; The Cultural Crisis of Our
Time (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), p. 69;
Burke, op. cit., p. 55.

117 Southern Mercury, October 9, December 6, 1888; and Harry Tracy,
op. cit., p. 304. The discussion of Populist nativism and anti-
Semitism can be examined by referring to the articles on the
subject listed in the footnotes on pages 18, 20 and 21 of this
study. A good summary of scholarship on the problem appears in
Walter Nugent, Tolerant Populists, pp. 3-31.
urban conditions in which people were "packed like sardines in a box, surrounded and forced to come constantly in contact with all kinds of vice, disease and death," they did not propose to turn the city-dweller into a farmer. They did, however, propose to alter the city by providing it with "wide streets and every modern improvement," and by making "each head of a family an independent homeowner." The farmer could not accept the urban environment unless it preserved essential rural institutions. The Populists made an open bid for the support of organized labor. The hostility toward this group in the agricultural community was recognized by a Populist supporter of organized labor in 1888: "labor will continue to organize. You may sneer, sneeze, cough, weep, laugh or howl, the fact remains and you can't rub it out." The Populist program, however, contained frequent pro-labor planks, and the farmer supported the idea that "the laborer is worthy of his hire no matter what branch of industry he is engaged in."

Tension existed between the program of the Populist leaders which stressed cooperation between the farmer and the urban laborer and the hostility of the marginal farmer toward cities and organized labor.

The plan for action of the Populists served as the leading edge of a powerful reform impulse in Texas during the 1890's. The People's Party program was a flexible economic plan which rested not on the issue of free silver, but on the assumption that full

118 Harry Tracy, op.cit., pp. 326-337; and Southern Mercury, December 13, 1888, January 10, 1889.
"monetary relief can only come to the country from a comprehensive financial scheme." The party refused to adopt any single solution to the farmer's economic problems. It resisted fusionist efforts and the adoption of free silver as a primary issue in 1896:

But experience has taught the people that free coinage is not the panacea for all political ills that we are heir to, and for that reason it is useless and unreasonable to ask the people's party to cast off all else and enter the campaign upon that one issue. 119

The delegates to the 1896 convention from Texas were known as the "immortal 103" by their fellow Texans because of their efforts in resisting fusion and the adoption of free silver as a panacea. The Populist program in Texas functioned as an educator of reform principles and as a continuing source of pressure on the Democratic Party. The Populists were never in control of the apparatus of government, but their ideas played a leading role in shaping Texas politics.

Production control did not become a Populist program. Macune proposed an embargo by all cotton producers at one point, but it was a temporary measure designed to secure concessions from merchants and bankers rather than to control the market. Production

119 T. Hugent, op. cit., p. 251; and Southern Mercury, May 21, 1896.
control violated the cultural myths of the agrarian community, particularly the values of the marginal farmer. Divine will demanded that the farmer till the land and bring forth crops. The farmer who allowed his fields to lie idle would lose touch with nature and abandon his special virtue. Production control would have required some form of subsidy for the marginal farmer to survive, and this would have violated his sense of justice. Men were to be rewarded for their effort and contribution, not for their failure to produce. Production control was ideologically impossible for the marginal farmer.

The most serious criticism of Populist ideology has been that it contained sour, illiberal and illtempered elements which found expression in later reactionary political activity. The paranoid tendency of the Populist leadership is said to have infected later movements. This criticism has little application in Texas. Populism made important contributions to later reform interests in the state such as the National Farmers Union and the Socialist Party.

120 Frederick Fliegel suggests that "low-income farmers can be expected to respond poorly to education and action programs which emphasize an aggressive commercial approach to agriculture." Frederick C. Fliegel, "Obstacles to Change For the Low-Income Farmer," Rural Sociology, XXV (September, 1960), p. 318.

Southern Progressivism was a direct descendant of Populism, and modern liberal forces in Texas draw support from old Populist strongholds. A recent study revealed that in 1957 liberals carried 15 of 20 important Populist counties in the state which have not had significant population changes since the decline of Populism.\(^{122}\) If Populism in Texas contained the seeds of sour illiberalism, it also contained the seeds of a continuing reform impulse.

The goal of Populist ideology was neither a past utopia nor a quasi-socialist future; the Texas farmer wanted neither earlier pastoral simplicity nor future totalitarian socialism. Texas Populists asked only that their society "give free play to competition within the proper sphere of individual effort and investment, and steadily oppose those extreme socialistic schemes which seek by the outside pressure of mere enactments or systems to accomplish what can only come from the free activities of men...."\(^{123}\) Their goal was economic and political reform and to a large extent their demands were either met or absorbed by the Democratic Party.

The ideology of Populism functioned as an important reform impulse and as an effective vehicle for agrarian discontent in Texas. The economic and social problems of the marginal farmer were joined with the unifying cultural myths of the agricultural community to produce a reformist view of reality. The changing program of the Populists became a vigorous call for reform. The rhetoric of the movement was an effective cohesive force within the farmer's community, and it functioned as an important force in the political arena in Texas.

\(^{123}\) T. Nugent, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
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