

Political Science 268 - American Political Thought Since the Civil War
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(Unpolished lecture notes by Andrew L. Yeats)

Last time: laying the groundwork for populism, particularly with reference to the fact that, at bottom, it's a moral protest founded on a sense of indignation about the moral state of society. Avarice, dishonesty, disloyalty, competitiveness are rewarded in society, and Populists see this as a problem. One of the things that really sets the Populists off is *societal* moral failing. Contemporary evangelical thinking talks a lot about individual failings – people fall into sin, they get abortions, they become feminists, they decide to be gay, whatever. That's very different from the style of the Populists.

The Populist sensibility begins with individual outrage. But progressive reflection on the state of things – progressively asking the question “why do people behave this way?” leads Populists to think more and more systemically. You start encountering the word “system” with Populists. “The wages system.” Populists think the system is somehow itself wrong – it explains individual failings. It's not that individuals aren't complicit in this, but the degree of responsibility needs to be lessened, because individuals can't fix it themselves. The system is impersonal. It's not that it's vicious, not that the system is dominated by Evil with a capital 'E,' it's that it's indifferent to human virtue. If you can be inventive and creative and make lots of money, the system is happy with it. Warren Buffett is a pretty good example of this – or George Soros. But if you can make good money cutting corners and being a crook, that's fine too.

In large scale, interdependent societies, one thing you have to notice is that both the fact and the feeling of responsibility get eroded. People say “I am not responsible for what happens. There are big forces shaping things, and my conduct won't really change things.” This even applies to powerful people, “Even if I'm really powerful – I'm still just the unwitting agent of the market.” Back in the days of the Cold War the leaders of the US and Great Britain would often imply “Oh, it's so unfortunate about this whole conflict, but there's nothing *we* can do.” etc. The loss of real responsibility in fact erodes the feeling of responsibility even more. It's *nice* not to feel responsible. You don't have to worry about your moral conduct.

This feeling of a release from responsibility is characteristic (broadly) of both the upper and the lower classes. It takes different forms, of course. One of the terrible problems is the way in which necessity (combined with the feeling that you don't count for anything or matter to society) removes your actions from the moral universe. Lots of intellectuals these days like to find rationalizations for this.

At the top level of the system you get indifference. People don't care about suffering overseas (or even here – they don't recognize it; It is, after all, part of the ongoing process of things).

Sumner's theories about systemic laws allow people to rationalize all sorts of things (even though he never had a moral intent to it in the first place).

To Populists, these impersonal, societal immoralities were much worse than the active doing of evil by one person.

The lower classes are governed by resentment and fury. A sense of being ignored, overlooked, not registered.

One place you can see this today is rock music: rage, resentment. This is the common connection between young people and people in the working/lower-classes of society.

People in the 60's were always baffled by the fact that the most dreadful urban riots were in LA, and if you took a look at the quality of housing in LA, it's not so bad. Small, to be sure, but not so bad. It's not made up of the high-rise monsters like Cabrini in Chicago. Why, then, is there so much violence? If you live in Watts (LA) you live in a world where people literally drive *over* you. If you live in Harlem, the train goes through and people *notice* you, even if just for a moment. In Detroit or LA, it's very easy not to even know what sort of community is under the highway. This feeling of marginalization led people to want to be heard, noticed.

Government and society in general are increasingly ruled (Populists say) by abstractions. Language Populists use is very familiar (wages system, gold standard, etc.)

Virtually all Americans think that when the GNP goes up the country is doing well. This is not always so. The unemployment rate is another incredibly inaccurate figure. Yet we evaluate ourselves based on abstractions. These abstractions (Populists say) reflect institutions based on dehumanized norms. They don't reflect the norms by which humans govern themselves in day-to-day life.

Along with this kind of institutional critique, one of the things that goes along with the Populist argument is a suspicion of history. This marks the Populists off from most orthodox Darwinists and most Marxists. Populists aren't so sure we're going in the right direction. A great piece of Utopian fiction is the novel "Looking Backward." The great Populist novel about the future is an anti-utopia. This is one of the first times you see anti-utopian images circulating in common political discourse.

Populists are also characteristically anti-materialists. People who see Marxism in Populism are wrong, but they're still onto something. Precisely what demoralizes and dehumanizes human beings is the definition of people in terms of their possessions. What makes production important is that it's a contribution: it's not what you own but what you give. The worst thing is to be in a position where you have nothing to contribute (they would have scored big with the urban masses had they only found language to express this). If all you do is consume, that's fundamentally debasing.

Populists are pretty insistent on the need to establish public authority over private instances of governance. When they look at institutions that are nominally private (e.g., the stock exchange) they see government: it's power; it affects people's lives.

(The Educational Testing Service has been granted by our society the prima facie right to lay the foundations of the class structure. Students' lives are governed by it.)

Talk of government as a regulator is fairly new around this time. Populists start talking about income tax, nationalization of the railroads and public utilities. If you brought Populists back now what they'd really hate is privatization. The government ought to own or regulate natural monopolies (e.g., telephone system).

How can you guarantee, then, that people can control the government!? This is where Populist argument gets really interesting. Populists have comparatively light interest in direct democracy. They like the recall vote, but it's not the big item on their agenda. They want to see power fragmented, and particularly the power of citizens organized in a decentralized way.

Populists don't even really love interest group organizations. What they really like is the model of the Knights of Labor, which is essentially a civic organization concerned with the question of work in general (not just limited to working class people). Populists believe intensely in politics. They don't like judges. Judges are people who are not accountable – most of them went to elite law schools. Judges and Lawyers operate in terms of language which is purposefully obscure. They also don't want to rely on bureaucracies: They are defined in terms of expertise, and expertise is defined in terms of established power. Of course, you can't totally avoid these things, but you want to minimize their power.

One of the things about the Populist movement that's interesting is that when the Populists hold a national political convention, it's a convention made up of delegates from hundreds of on-the-ground organizations. Each organization has meetings, agendas, treasurers, etc. The problem of the Populists is that they can't find a candidate. The only time they seriously contest a presidential election is 1892, but their candidate dies. They rattled around for a while and came up with someone else, but he was a flop.

By contrast, 3rd parties in our time are all candidate-centered. Do we pay attention to the green-party? When the green party has a candidate, the candidate is more important than the party. (Ralph Nader)

Now we organize this kind of politics in terms of the "star group." Rather than a relation of members to each other, there's a relation between individual members and a "star" figure.

Populists want to re-create civil society. One of the most important Populist theorists is a guy named Lloyd who wrote "Wealth against Commonwealth." He also wrote a book about Switzerland and a book about New Zealand. Switzerland is decentralized, but also

has a great economy. → Can you get power down to a human scale without losing the advantages of a modern society?

Two big problems the Populists run into: First is a problem of culture. To the extent that Populists can talk about economics, they don't have much of a problem. But culture gives them fits! It's very hard for the great leaders of Populism (most of them Midwestern or Southern; all of them Protestants) to talk to people in the Eastern cities who are very likely recent immigrants – likely Catholic or Jewish, and have that different style of rhetoric we've talked about. One of the things that bedevils the Left down to 1936 or so is the question of prohibition: most people who are Populists are dries: they think it would be a good idea to at least limit the sale of liquor. But this isn't a great way to talk to people in the inner city.

The second big problem for the Populists is the question of race. Most of Populist support is in the south. Most Populists don't think race matters – many are racist, to be sure, but it's not a key part of Populism. The problem is that if you start running political campaigns in the South campaigning to black voters (the de-registration of Blacks comes about a decade later) the established whites are going to run a campaign in which they yell “nigger” at you – and that's precisely what they did. If you lose enough elections (and Populists do) in which race has been a significant question, Southern Populists begin to confront this question: is it more important to win an election, even if you have to make a deal with the devil on the question of race, or should you stick with your (not very strong) convictions on race – and lose. The great 20th century example of this is George Wallace. Southern Populism can never really get past this. Many Southern Populists, like Tom Watson, become full-blown racists. A lot of people don't – and they lose.

If you read American historiography, you'll run into a big event in Populism in 1896. Democrats nominate the left-most Democrat: William Jennings Bryan. Populists have to decide whether to support him, or do you run a 3rd candidate making almost sure that the Republicans win. Nobody knew how to express Populist sentiment as well as Bryan, but he was a Democrat.

Many historians lament this decision. Bryan loses (though very narrowly, and it scares the Republicans to death). (Karl Rove takes his bearings from the 1896 election – his heroes are McKinley, etc.) Populists see siding with the Democrats as a departure from principle. One of the problems with this argument is that Populists are very closely linked to their constituents: how then are they able to think so theoretically and not be overwhelmed by the desire to help the oppressed?

An enormous number of young Americans were radicalized by the Bryan campaign. Lots of people who were radicalized by the Bryan campaign just kept getting more and more radical. 3 of the first 4 chairmen of the American Communist Party were from Kansas. Interesting book: “From Bryan to Stalin.”

Another way to see nomination of Bryan in 1896 is that it's not a defeat, but rather the Populists capture the Democrats. Bryan as a candidate has enormous energy. He spends the next 20 years going to every damn convention anywhere, building up his followers. He transforms the Democratic Party. Ideologically it had been the party of reputable liberalism: free trade, civil service, small government. After the Bryan nomination, there's only one election where the Democratic candidate isn't to the left of the Republican candidate. This is the start of the left-right polarity of the democratic and republican parties.

One other aspect of the Populist heritage: there is a great Populist text in American literature: *The Wizard of Oz*. Frank Baum is really playing around with Populist themes. (Dorothy has silver rather than ruby slippers if you really read the book. The great triumph of the Communist party is that they got *red* slippers for the movie.)

Dorothy acquires her ascendancy in Oz by killing the Wicked Witch of the East. The Tin Woodman got to be made out of tin because the harder he worked the more of his body he chopped off. The harder he works, the more he's replaced by machine. This is the alienation of labor. The scarecrow is stupid. The Populists see the problem with Farmers as that they suspect their own intelligence – not that they're actually stupid.

The best literary critic to approach this text thought that probably the Cowardly Lion is William Jennings Bryan. Similarly, Dorothy tries to rely on the Yellow Brick Road (gold standard?) and it sort-of gets you there, but it also gets you to a place where you're likely to be drugged by poppies (opiate of the masses?) and the Emerald City at the end is all smoke and mirrors anyway.

The other interesting thing is that the last great antagonist is the Wicked Witch of the West, who is someone who misuses nature. She is also destroyed by water. One of the things Baum was on to was the question of the rainfall line. West of the Rainfall line you can't be indifferent to government because you need Government to provide you water. You're very likely to find ideological extremes in Western states.

The Wizard of Oz: If only we could understand and transform Home into something to be cherished, Nature as something not to overcome but to be tended... These are Populist themes!

Next time: Progressivism.

Economic power is increasingly being concentrated in a few hands (the great corporations), which have (and know they have) political power. That kind of concentration of power on one hand, and increasing ferment of protest from farmers and workers on the other has its impact on middle-class people. The real thrust of Populist argument is that the middle-class are getting squeezed out. Though most middle-class people are hesitant to identify with Populists, the critique gets to them. They hear it. (Particularly in the context that the space for the small businessman is being squeezed out.) Progressivism grows out largely from anxiety about this condition.