

Populism — Solution to Farmers' Problems or Pointless Agitation?

Critical Thinking: In this section you will analyze opposing viewpoints on the value of Populism.

The late 19th century was a troubled time for rural America. While much of the U.S. economy expanded, farmers suffered from a steady decline in agricultural prices. In 1887 a North Carolina newspaper editor summed up the frustration of many farmers: "There is something radically wrong in our industrial system. There is a screw loose. . . . The railroads have never been so prosperous, and yet agriculture languishes [suffers]. The banks have never done a better . . . business, and yet agriculture languishes. Manufacturing enterprises never made more money, . . . and yet agriculture languishes. Towns and cities flourish and 'boom,' . . . and yet agriculture languishes." Farmers had more to complain about than just falling prices for their crops. As the United States became increasingly industrialized after the Civil War, the once largely independent farmers became more and more dependent on people, institutions, and forces from outside rural America. Railroads transported farm products to distant markets; various wholesalers and middlemen stored, processed, and distributed crops and other produce; bankers and loan companies provided farmers with capital to expand operations.

Actually, it was increased production created by this expansion — along with advances in agricultural technology — that was a major cause of falling farm prices. However, overproduction was an abstract, invisible enemy; farmers were looking for more tangible culprits on which to blame their problems. America's first big businesses, the railroads, were considered the farmers' greatest foes. They were accused of setting unfairly high shipping rates for rural areas, and of offering rebates to the larger farmers. Operators of grain elevators, whom farmers claimed paid them less than their crops were worth, were another target. Banks and loan companies also were among farmers' enemies. (Debt — often leading to loss of farms through bank foreclosures — was a major problem for farmers. In the 1880s their indebtedness was growing two and one-half times faster than their wealth.) Farmers began to organize in response to their problems. In 1892 farmers and laborers in the Midwest founded the People's, or Populist, party to advance their aims. Their attempt to capture the White House in the election that year failed, but their demands — which included federal regulation of corporations and banking, better public schools, direct election of U.S. senators, and a graduated income tax — were adopted by later reformers, and some were enacted. The first of the following readings is an excerpt from a speech delivered in 1890 by Mary Elizabeth Lease (1853–1933), who later became involved in the Populist movement. A fiery speaker once referred to as "Patrick Henry in petticoats," Lease became famous for urging Kansas farmers to raise "less corn and more hell."

This is a nation of inconsistencies. The Puritans fleeing from oppression became oppressors. We fought England for our liberty and put chains on four million of blacks. We wiped out slavery and by our tariff laws

and national banks began a system of white wage slavery worse than the first. Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street.

The great common people of this country are slaves, and monopoly is the master. The West and South are bound and prostrate [helpless] before the manufacturing East.

Money rules, and our Vice-President [financier Levi P. Morton, a partner in a London bank] is a London banker. Our laws are the output of a system which clothes rascals in robes and honesty in rags.

The parties lie to us and the political speakers mislead us. We were told two years ago to go to work and raise a big crop, that was all we needed. We went to work and plowed and planted; the rains fell, the sun shone, nature smiled, and we raised the big crop that they told us to; and what came of it? Eight-cent corn, ten-cent oats, two-cent beef, and no price at all for butter and eggs — that's what came of it.

Then the politicians said we suffered from overproduction. Overproduction, when 10,000 little children, so statistics tell us, starve to death every year in the United States, and over 100,000 shopgirls in New York are forced to sell their virtue for the bread their niggardly wages deny them.

Tariff is not the paramount question. The main question is the money question. . . . Kansas suffers from two great robbers, the Santa Fe Railroad and the loan companies. The common people are robbed to enrich their masters. . . .

We want money, land, and transportation. We want the abolition of the national banks, and we want the power to make loans direct from the government. We want the accursed foreclosure system wiped out. Land equal to a tract thirty miles wide and ninety miles long has been foreclosed and bought in by loan companies of Kansas in a year.

We will stand by our homes and stay by our fireside by force if necessary, and we will not pay our debts to the loan-shark companies until the government pays its debts to us. The people are at bay; let the bloodhounds of money who have dogged us thus far beware.

The second reading is an excerpt from an editorial by E. L. Godkin (1831–1902) that appeared in *The Nation* on July 7, 1892, just after the Populists had nominated a former Union general, James B. Weaver, as their candidate for the presidency.

The People's Party convention, which has just completed its sessions at Omaha, was the most largely attended and most thoroughly representative national gathering which any third party has ever got together. All sections of the country sent delegates, and the delegates were full of enthusiasm.

The dominant tone of the assembly was discontent with existing conditions. A large part of this discontent was the vague dissatisfaction which is always

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felt by the incompetent and lazy and “shift-
less” when they contemplate those who have
10 got on better in the world. But there was
also manifested that spirit of doubt as to the
tendencies of our social development of late
years which is shared by many thoughtful and philosophic observers, and
which causes such observers to question whether something should not be
15 done to check these tendencies.

Practically the platform declares that everybody could be made happy if
the government would print a vast quantity of paper currency, allow free
coinage and foist light-weight silver dollars upon the country, establish an
immense loaning agency, and take control of the railroads. In other words,
20 the fundamental theory of the party is that the federal government is an
institution of such omniscience [knowledge of everything] and omnipotence
[unlimited power], such a repository [storehouse] of wealth and wisdom, that
it can be trusted with limitless power. In short, the theory holds that a paternal
government can make all its children “healthy, wealthy, and wise.”

25 General Weaver is the proper candidate for President of such a party. He
is a demagogue [unscrupulous popular leader] who came to the surface in
the Greenback [reform party of the 1870s] period, and was nominated for
President by that element in 1880. He is the sort of man who is always ready
to take up with any new organization which can give him either office or
30 prominence, and no platform could be constructed so ridiculous that he would
not gladly stand upon it.

CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

PART A ANALYZING THE READINGS

Answer each of the following questions.

1. **Identifying central issues.** Who were three groups that Mary Elizabeth Lease said were hurting the American farmer?
2. **Identifying central issues.** What were the criticisms that E. L. Godkin made of the Populists and their program?
3. **Making comparisons.** How did Lease's and Godkin's perceptions of the people attracted to the Populist movement differ?
4. **Making comparisons.** How did Lease and Godkin differ in their views on the proper relationship between the government and the citizen?
5. **Recognizing bias.** Did either Lease or Godkin reveal any bias in these excerpts? Explain.

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PART B EXPRESSING OPINIONS

Determine your opinion of each of the following statements, indicating the response that best expresses your view. Be prepared to defend your opinions in classroom discussion.

1. The Populists wanted too much government regulation of agriculture.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
2. Political discontent is always created by lazy, unsuccessful people envious of those who are better off.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
3. The government has an obligation today to ensure the survival of small, family-owned farms even if they are less efficient than large, corporate-owned operations.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
4. If *populist* is defined as “expressing the outlook of working-class people,” neither the Democratic or Republican parties today show much Populist influence.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
5. The U.S. government today is controlled by the wealthy and powerful.
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

PART C WRITING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Select one of the following writing projects and complete it in a brief composition (three to five paragraphs).

1. **Recognizing values.** Imagine you are Mary Elizabeth Lease and respond to E. L. Godkin's comments in a letter to *The Nation*.
2. **Expressing problems.** Argue for or against the position in number three of part B above.
3. **Testing conclusions.** Argue for or against the position that Populism has had a generally beneficial influence on American politics.