CHAPTER 32

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POPULISM AND PRAXIS

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Any theoretical inquiry into the contested meaning of populism leads to central and recurring dilemmas of democratic theory and democratic politics. This essay will travel this path and argue that populism—conceived as a theoretical construct and a historical phenomenon—has political resources often unrecognized by either its liberal critics or its radical democratic admirers in contemporary democratic theory. Rather than focus on what James Morone has called populism's "democratic wish" (Morone, 1998)—its desire to transcend mediating institutions and return power to the purifying immediacy of popular voice—or insist on what Ernesto Laclau calls its "oppositional logic" (Laclau, 2005)—its efforts to construct from disparate grievances a popular subject ("the people") defined against the dominating power of a corrupt elite ("the few")—I will emphasize the institutional improvisations and formative praxis of populism, its robust but often unexamined experimentation with different forms of political cooperation and democratic enactment. This essay approaches populism as an exemplary instance of radical democratic praxis and prefiguration.

This important aspect of populism's history has been systematically obfuscated by the influential theory of populism presented in the work of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt's focus on the centrality of popular identification to any theory of democracy has prevented populism's critics and admirers in democratic theory from engaging with the neglected elements I focus on here; it has captivated democratic theory with the admittedly difficult question of *who* the people are ("the boundary problem") and too often obscured the closely related question of *how* the people act ("the enactment problem") (Abizadeh, 2012; Frank, 2010; Honig, 2007; Nässtrom, 2007; Whelan, 1983). Rather than focusing on either political identity or institutional and practical form, democratic theories of populism should investigate the historical entanglement of these registers in the praxis of populist politics.

In the essay's first section, I critique the Schmittian conception shared by populism's liberal critics and radical democratic admirers in contemporary democratic theory; in the second section, I briefly exemplify the kind of historical inquiry elicited by this theoretical critique. A return to the rough ground of populism's history—and I will focus on

the nineteenth-century American case—might help disenthrall democratic theorists of the debilitating Schmittian picture, and, doing so, reorient the questions we ask about populism's relation to democratic politics: from the identity of the popular subject to its different repertoires of popular enactment. The hope is that this reorientation will encourage a democratic theory of populism less narrowly preoccupied with debates over populism's ends and more attentive to its inventive means, or, better, how the question of its ends have been historically entangled with questions surrounding the means envisioned to achieve them.

Populism: From Identity to Praxis

Who is the subject of populism? It is a familiar, if also vexing, question. Populism's appeal to the authority of a unitary popular will has long been denounced by liberal democratic theorists as a dangerous perversion of democracy, even a "proto-totalitarian logic" (Koem and Rummens, 2007: 414). Following the work of prominent critics like Robert Michels and Walter Lipmann, populism's appeal to "the people" has also been debunked as a delusional fantasy—a political metaphysics and a quasi-mysticism—by social scientists on both the class-analysis left (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990) and the rational-choice right (e.g. Riker, 1988). Even more sympathetic scholars tend to disagree about what distinguishes populism and its subject from other forms of politics. Indeed, there is little agreement on what category of analysis populism should be included under in the first place. Is it a form of party organization and electoral mobilization, or a social movement and example of contentious politics (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012)? Is it a style of political rhetoric—a "flexible mode of persuasion" (Kazin, 1998: 3)—or a coherent albeit "thin-centred" ideology (Mudde, 2004: 543)? Or is it "something more nearly resembling a mood or . . . an ethos" (Goodwyn, 1976: x)? With all of this disagreement, it should not be surprising that one of the most influential contemporary theories of populism—Ernesto Laclau's—places indeterminacy or ambiguity at its very center, and argues that "populist reason" and its appeal to the authorizing power of "the people" is equivalent to the logic of the "empty signifier" (Laclau, 2005).

While many scholars of populism—historians, political scientists, and political theorists—emphasize its political and ideological flexibility, it is not completely "open." Populism is a discourse organized around a relatively clear set of normative commitments. Most obviously, populism emerges from—and is enabled by—a superordinate commitment to popular sovereignty, to the modern legitimating idea that the people are the ultimate ground of public authority (Morgan, 1989; Tuck, 2016). Populism shares this central reference with modern democracy itself, and in this sense Nadia Urbinati is right to note that populism's "character and claims are parasitic to democratic theory" (Urbinati, 1998: 116). However, the populist parasite cannot be so easily removed from the democratic host as Urbinati and other liberal democratic theorists would have us believe. Populism cannot be easily excised from democracy because it emerges from

a familiar paradox internal to democracy's commitment to the authority of "We the People." I don't mean the supposedly paradoxical relationship between constitutionalism and democracy, or legality and legitimacy, but the more fundamental (as in, logically prior) paradox of democratic peoplehood itself. Bonnie Honig simply calls it the "paradox of politics" (Honig, 2007). "Determining who constitutes the people is an inescapable yet democratically unanswerable dilemma; it is not a question the people can procedurally decide because the very question subverts the premises of its resolution" (Frank, 2010: 2). In *Constituent Moments* I tracked the adventures of this paradox in post-revolutionary American political culture, but argued beyond that case that what Sophia Näsström has called the "legitimacy of the people" problem haunts all theories of democracy and continually vivifies democratic practice (Nässtrom, 2007). It does so because it opens up dilemmas of authorization not only in extraordinary moments of constitutional crisis but in the small dramas of authorization that mark the agonistic course of ordinary democratic speech and action.

Populism should be understood as a political manifestation of this underlying dilemma of democratic theory and practice, because this dilemma establishes the discursive condition of populism's defining claim to transcend the authorized but corrupted institutions of popular representation through a purifying appeal to unmediated popular voice. The defining claim of populism emerges from the democratic necessity and impossibility of the people speaking in their own name; it arises from the fact that the people's authority is based in a "continually reiterated but never fully realized reference to the sovereign people beyond representation, beyond the law, the spirit beyond the letter, the Word beyond the words" (Frank, 2010: 3). Populism's people—"the working man," "the forgotten man," "the silent majority," "the 99 percent"—is at once enacted through representational claims and forever pointing beyond the political and legal boundaries inscribed by those claims. The subject of populism is therefore neither the sovereign electorate determined by the constitutional rules of the game ("pre-existing legal rules for aggregating preferences") (Holmes, 1995: 148), nor an immanent "multitude" capable of formulating popular will altogether free from the vicissitudes of representational claims (Hardt and Negri, 2004). The parasite of populism takes place in the representational gap of authorization between these spheres. Indeed, some of the power of populist enactments and their central claims can be attributed to the political contest opened up by this gap in authorization, to its performative transfiguration of a given political context. Populism emerges as an event by exploiting this tension between the authorized representation of public authority and the enactment of popular power that proceeds without authorization. Populism is indeed parasitic on democracy, but this parasitism is what lends it the transformative and rejuvenating democratic power attributed to it by some of its best scholars in history and political theory (Kazin, 1998; Canovan, 1981; 2002).

In order to isolate the populist parasite from the democratic host, many democratic theorists reject populism's transformative potential beyond the existing rules of the game and instead emphasize populism's denial of pluralism, its rejection of the separation of powers, and similar affronts to liberal constitutionalism (e.g. Kirshner, 2010; Urbinati,

2014). Populism is said to adopt a "phantasmal image of the organic unity of the political community" as a way of legitimating the suspension of constitutional protections it presents as obstacles to the unified articulation of popular voice (Koen and Rummens, 2007: 414). But doesn't liberal constitutionalism also quietly rely on some image of "the people-as-one," to use Claude Lefort's term, even if that image usually goes underarticulated and unjustified in liberal democratic theory (Lefort, 1986)? Responding critically to the dangers of populism's appeal to the people's constituent power does not in itself adequately confront, much less resolve, the political paradox that underwrites or engenders that appeal. Liberals sometimes seem to worry about the "organic unity" of populism's people as a way of displacing their own inability to adequately conceptualize the formation of the subject of popular authorization. To take that problem seriously is to invite the parasite into your house, to see that it cannot be simply seen as "a degeneration of the democratic logic" (Urbinati, 1998).

What I have written about populism up to this point clearly resonates with key aspects of Ernesto Laclau's work, and with other radical democratic admirers of populism who nonetheless remain critical of the romanticism of the immanent and self-organizing multitude (which Laclau dismisses as a "metaphysical wish" and "a gift from heaven") (Laclau, 2005: 240). Laclau's longstanding interest in populism dates to his early Gramscian writings on Peronism in Argentina—his exploration of why there can be "both progressive and reactionary forms of Caesarism"—but this interest is given a fully articulated formal analysis more recently in *The Populist Reason* (Laclau, 1977; 2005). The "logic" of populism on this account—which Laclau takes to be "synonymous with the political" itself—is centered on "the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power," and the unification of this people around a powerful symbol or ideal: the empty signifier (Laclau, 2005: 154). In Benjamin Arditi's sympathetic development of Laclau's argument, populism is an "internal periphery" that opens up within democratic institutions, as the people identify with a symbolic representation of popular power, the "virtual immediacy" of which constitutes a political authority or source of decision beyond established or legally authorized institutions of governance (parliamentary representation, political parties, courts, and so on) (Arditi, 2005). For both liberal critics and radical democratic admirers, populism is often defined by the antagonistic formation of a unifying political identity out of the conflicted social terrain of competing interests and demands. It organizes competing interests into a demand that claims to transcend interest and interest group politics altogether. Populism, on this account, is a political phenomenon centered around the constitution of an authorizing political subject, which critics and admirers understand primarily in terms of popular identification: a qualitative identification that necessarily precedes and transcends the quantitative aggregation of individual votes or the mediation of legal procedures.

This radical democratic affirmation of populism thus echoes liberal critics who worry that populist appeals to the regenerative and unified authority of the people's uncorrupted will entails a dangerous Caesarist rejection of pluralism, checks and balances, proceduralism, deliberation, and law. According to Urbinati, populism's polarization of politics into the "pure many" and the "corrupt few," its simplification of political debate

into the Manichean opposition of good and evil, and its reliance on the politics of popular acclamation make representative democracy its "true and real target" (Urbinati, 2014: 133). What Urbinati and other liberals often object to most about populism is what Laclau and his radical democratic followers enthusiastically affirm: populism's logic of "polarization," which Urbinati claims makes it "less inclusive" than formal democratic citizenship. "Populism," she writes, "is a politics not of inclusion but primarily of exclusion" (Urbinati, 2014: 147). Populism converts opinion into the homogeneous popular acclamation that takes shape around the concentrated power of a single leader who alone is capable of giving form to the popular will. Urbinati insists that without "the presence of a leader or a centralized leadership . . . a popular movement that has populist rhetoric (i.e. polarization and antirepresentative discourse) is not yet populism" (Urbinati, 2014: 129). "The search for a leader is one of populism's most specific characteristics," she claims, so the "personalization of politics is not an accident in populism, but rather its destiny" (Urbinati, 2014: 153, 156). It is only through the identification of the popular will with that of the Caesarist leader, on this account, that the people can be effectively reinstalled at the center of populist democracy and exercise its "limitless decisionism" (Urbinati, 2014: 152).

The problem with this familiar emphasis on populism's "virtual immediacy" (Arditi, 2005), its "impatience with procedures" (Crick, 2005), and its "attempt to achieve an immediate identity of governed and governing" (Urbinati, 1998: 116) is that it is more beholden to the political theory of Carl Schmitt than it is drawn from the diverse political histories of populism. In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* and elsewhere Schmitt offered a compelling account of democracy built around mechanisms of identification. The "abstract logic" of democracy, Schmitt writes, rests on "a series of identities" (between governed and governing, sovereign and subject, will and law, and so on) (Schmitt, 1992: 27). However, all of these identities are not a "palpable reality," but solely the effect of "a *recognition* of the identity. It is not a matter of something actually equal legally, politically, or sociologically, but rather of identifications," and a "distance always remains between real equality and the results of identification . . . Everything depends on how the will of the people is formed" (Schmitt, 1992: 26–7). For Schmitt, the "Jacobin logic" of democracy—the ability of a minority or even a single leader to speak on behalf of popular will—always exists as a possibility because this symbolic identification is not encumbered by formal procedures, mediating institutions, or the tallying of votes, but instead relies on a vital rearticulation of the qualitative identification with popular will on which all of these secondary quantitative mediations rest: it brings the otherwise latent or presumed reliance on "the-people-as-one" into full articulation. Through (relatively) unmediated popular acclamation the will of the people emerges as a kind of self-evident and unchallenged presence, but one only sustained through the antagonistic and political line it draws between itself and its enemy. "An absolute human equality would be an equality understood only in terms of itself," Schmitt writes, "and without risk; it would be an equality without the necessary correlate of inequality . . . an indifferent equality" (Schmitt, 1992: 12). The Schmittian approach to democracy is bluntly directed against the false and deadening mediations of the constitutional

state—elections, parliamentary procedures—in favor of the enlivening immediacy of popular and oppositional identifications, or what he calls the "direct expression of democratic substance and power" (Schmitt, 1992: 17). This focus not only makes democracy compatible with populism but—notoriously—with dictatorship. This sets the stage for the essential role of the Caesarist leader to this conception of populism and democracy, and its devastating reduction of political speech and action to plebiscitary acclamation.

With this familiar picture now before us, it is worth asking: What does this picture of populism prevent us from seeing? Democratic theory's preoccupation with populism's extraordinary appeal to a popular symbolic authority beyond the mediating institutions of the state, and its debates over whether this appeal is restorative or destructive of democracy, is sustained by a captivating picture of populism that obscures some of its most important resources for democratic theorizing. This preoccupation retains a focus on *who* the authorizing people are—the affective power of identification—and distracts attention from *how* the people are institutionally embodied, how their power is collectively enacted and sustained. It remains focused first and foremost on the political subject, secondarily on its ends, and leaves its formative means largely uninterrogated and unexplored. It is revealing that the "logic" of populism is often referred to in contemporary democratic theory, but very rarely its formative praxis. Laclau, for example, emphasizes both at various moments in his work, but he invokes praxis primarily in the sense of the emergence of a collective subject through struggle and hegemonic articulation (especially in his earlier work with Chantal Mouffe). This formalist account offers few resources for thinking about the importance of practical habituation into certain orientations, dispositions, and capacities for radical democratic action and cooperative self-government, and how this formative praxis actively shapes the ends that radical democrats pursue. Laclau is interested primarily in how a plurality of different grievances and interests are articulated and transformed into a unifying popular "demand," but he spends little or no time on the shaping practical transformation of the spaces and institutions from which these demands and their subjects emerge. While radical democratic activists have sometimes stressed these issues, with a few important exceptions radical democratic theories of populism have usually neglected how the practices of popular enactment give concrete form to the popular subject and the ends it pursues (but see Coles, 2004; Grattan, 2016; Mantena, 2012; Phulwani, forthcoming). A brief return to the rough ground of populism's political history, and in particular its institutional improvisations and attentiveness to formative praxis, may loosen the hold of this theoretical picture and help reorient debates over populism's democratically robust or destructive qualities in contemporary democratic theory. The prevailing focus on the immediacy of symbolic identification above, below, and beyond institutions seems to force a choice between the positive political subject conceived primarily in terms of an electorate or the "democratic mysticism" of immediate expressions of popular will (Holmes, 1995: 148). It is an opposition that secures a highly suspect formulation of populist politics and prevents both liberal critics and radical democratic admirers from exploring the limitations of the theoretical model they share.

Desperate Inventions
and Movement Culture

The Farmers Alliance, which Lawrence Goodwyn describes as the heart of American Populism's "movement culture," was born in rural Lampasas County, Texas, in 1877 (Goodwyn, 1976).[1] The first organizers proclaimed themselves the "Knights of Reliance," and while their initial efforts were short-lived—they disbanded after a year—the movement was revived in the mid-1880s with the emergence and rapid spread of hundreds of county alliances and suballiances throughout the American South. By the time the People's Party was founded in 1892, and the Minnesotan orator Ignatius Donnelly wrote the rousing preamble to its Omaha Platform, the Alliance had spread to forty-three states and territories. Hundreds of thousands of men and women participated in this interlacing network of alliances and suballiances over this period. In the words of the Platform, their goal was "to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of 'the plain people,' with which class it originated" (Pollack, 1967: 59). As Goodwyn summarizes, over these years "the farmers . . . experimented in democratic forms in an effort to address the causes of the poverty of their lives. Gradually, they learned the strength of what they called "cooperation and organization." With growing confidence they learned a way to address their condition, and they also learned how to explain their way to others. It was a new democratic language, fashioned out of the old heritage, but straining to break free so as to give definition to liberating new conceptions about the social relations of man" (Goodwyn, 1976: xi). The farmers' experimentation with new democratic forms and their sustained collective effort to understand and act on the impoverished conditions of their lives—to generate cooperative democratic power outside the established institutions of governance—defines American Populism's radical democratic realism.

The impoverished conditions these farmers sought to collectively understand and combat were an effect of the social, economic, and cultural dislocations of the crop-lien system, which effected nothing less than a Polanyian "great transformation" in the organization of rural life in much of the American South and Midwest in the wake of Reconstruction (Polanyi, 1944). The crop-lien was a system of debt peonage through which independent landowning farmers became increasingly dependent upon creditors, furnishing agents, and merchants. Farmers relied on these creditors for the seed, equipment, and furnishings necessary for farm productivity, putting a lien on their eventual harvest. As Goodwyn explains, "once a farmer signed his first crop-lien he was in bondage to his merchant as long as he failed to pay out" (Goodwyn, 1976: 28). The terms of these loans, both in the interest charged and in the inflated cost of loaned equipment and furnishings, along with low commodity prices and the occasional drought, engendered a system of increasing indebtedness that over these decades culminated in dramatic increases in the seizure of debtor land by creditors. The crop-lien system converted millions of independent land-owning yeoman farmers into indebted tenants in the 1870s through the 1890s (Sanders, 1999). As the Arkansas populist editor

W. Scott Morgan wrote in 1889, the "tendencies toward centralization . . . concentrate the wealth of the country into the hands of the few, the inevitable result of which is to establish a land aristocracy on the one hand, and a mass of dependent tenants on the other" (Tindall, 1976: 18). More than a way of organizing economic relations and exchange, the crop-lien was a "system that ordered life itself," creating an intricate economy of domination and dependence that wove the experience of humiliation and powerlessness into the daily life of millions of black and white American farmers; Goodwyn goes so far as to describe it as a "modified form of slavery" (Goodwyn, 1976: 25, 28).

The Alliance was created to understand and collectively organize against the far-reaching causes and consequences of this life-ordering system, including the political forces that sustained and enforced it. As W. L. Garvin and S. O. Daws wrote in their *History of the National Farmers' Alliance and Co-Operative Union of America*, the Alliance "was initially organized for the purpose of studying and investigating questions having direct reference to economic legislation"(Garvin and Daws, 1887: 87), but the initial *Declaration of Purposes of the National Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union*, written in 1887, also sought to identify the broader working of an impersonal system that led to the "concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, to the impoverishment and bondage of so many" (Garvin and Daws, 1887: 72–83). The alliances and suballiances that took shape over these years investigated and deliberated upon the workings of this system and the legal and political powers that sustained it; they developed cooperative economic organizations that might effectively combat or replace it, in the form of cooperative stores, commodity exchange pools, and lending agencies. Their experiments in building a "cooperative commonwealth" within the framework of increasingly industrialized capitalism grew out of their collective experience of having structural and impersonal forces practically undermine their republican ideals of independence and equality. The Alliance gave farmers a "place to think in," in Goodwyn's words, and a place to deliberate together by connecting their personal experience of impoverished dependence with the similar experiences of millions of others (Goodwyn, 1976). In doing so, the Alliance allowed its members to see the broader economic and political relevance of their personal tragedies, and to build a countervailing collective power on the basis of that shared realization. The Alliance offered sites, or what Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte call "free spaces," where these farmers could learn to think and act politically outside of the vice grip of the two party system (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Boyte, 1989).

The Farmers' Alliance developed a class analysis of American politics and economy, and understood the central division around which they organized to be between the "producing classes" and "the moneyed interests." "There are two distinct and well-defined classes composing society," declared the editor of the *Louisiana Populist*, "the producing and the non-producing classes. Between these two is irrepressible conflict" (Mitchell, 1987: 81). The ideology of producerism which underwrote much of Populist social and political analysis had roots in Physiocratic economic theory as well as the Yeoman Ideal of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian

republicanism, and it has played a powerful role in episodes of political radicalism since the time of the Revolution (Stock, 1997). The central idea of pruducerism was that the production of material goods by farmers and workers was the economic and moral basis of the social and political order. "On the products they created rested all else," Bruce Palmer explains: "society's laws, government, medium of exchange, the welfare of the entire social order" (Palmer, 1980: 3). Following this basic commitment, American populists believed there was "something radically wrong," as one Populist publicist put it, with an economic system "where those who work most get least, and those who work least get most" (Tindall, 1976). American Populists treated those who made money outside of production—in creating markets, exchange, banking—as parasitic on the productive capacities of the body politic. "Wealth belongs to him who creates it," as the Omaha Platform declared, "and every dollar taken from industry without an equivalent is robbery" (Pollack, 1967: 63). Intrinsic to this producerist ideology, beyond its economic theory, was a broader and more encompassing suspicion of abstraction and delegation. Just as wealth should remain in the hands of those who physically produced it, so personal independence, and that of one's surrounding community, should not be compromised by impersonal market forces or by political and economic decisions made by distant and unaccountable bureaucrats.

A central contradiction shaped the experience of millions of American farmers who supported Populism: their inherited republican and producerist ideals no longer corresponded to their practical experience living in a rapidly industrializing national economy; this contradiction led American Populists to argue that the basic terms of the social contract were being torn apart. Dorothy Ross has argued that this widely perceived contradiction between ideals and experience produced a crisis period in American liberalism, and in its hegemonic discourse of American exceptionalism, as Populists in the countryside and socialists in the cities came to reject the "irrelevance of the inherited political dialogue of the nation" and envision new forms of "cooperative commonwealth" (Ross, 1984). Envisioning a different and more cooperative form of democratic life than the vision offered by the Yeoman ideal was the Farmers Alliance's response to this perceived crisis; their organized struggle against the crop-lien system did not only produce an alternative vision of economic organization within the deep inequalities of America's first Gilded Age, but the outlines of an alternative practice of democratic citizenship. Focusing narrowly on the Alliance's economic motivations, or treating the vast network of alliances and suballiances of the "cooperative commonwealth" merely as institutional means for achieving larger economic, or narrowly electoral ends, neglects how the cooperative experiences facilitated by the Alliance shaped the ends they pursued. The "cooperative commonwealth" American Populists struggled for was practically enacted on a smaller scale within the ongoing cooperative activities of the Alliance itself. The political goals of the Farmers' Alliance were revised and reformed by the means these poor farmers experimented with to achieve them. Theodore Mitchell has demonstrated the centrality of political education—which he describes as a form of political "paideia": the formation of assertive and cooperative

citizenship through practical activity—to Populist politics and self-understanding (Mitchell, 1987: 3–23). The importance of political education to Populism brings its complex entwinement of means and ends into clear view. "Out of crouching slaves," declared the *National Economist* in 1890, participation in the Alliance is "making dauntless, intelligent citizens" (Mitchell, 1987: 93).

Political education and formative praxis was a guiding motivation of American populism from the very beginning of the movement. In his unpublished memoirs that give an account of the founding of the first Alliance in Lampasas County, for example, A. P. Hungate wrote that he and the other founders had originally organized to "more speedily educate ourselves in the science of free government," fearing that "the day is rapidly approaching when all the balance of labor's products will become concentrated into the hands of a few, there to constitute a power that would enslave posterity" (Goodwyn, 1976: 33). These founders envisioned a self-created association that would create a countervailing democratic power to the bigness, progress, consolidation, and empire of the Gilded Age. Hungate described their alliance as "a grand social and political palace where liberty may dwell and justice be safely domiciled" (Goodwyn, 1976: 33). The central importance of education to American Populism has often been forgotten by liberal historians critical of the movement. Richard Hofstadter, to take only the best-known example, took Populism to be a terrible symptom of "anti-intellectualism" in American life and of the "paranoid style" of American politics (Hofstadter, 1962; 1967). It is worth remembering that "Knowledge is Power" was an Alliance slogan, and that when the People's Party was founded it was often referred to by contemporaries as the "reading party" and the "writing and talking party." Writing in the *Southern Mercury* in 1891, Evan Jones echoed a typical refrain when he wrote that "those who have combined by organized effort . . . dread us because they know that our organization is a school, and through its teachings the road to liberty will soon be available to the oppressed" (Mitchell, 1987: 47).

Populism's educational agenda had many components, including a vast lecturing network, hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers, inexpensive books and pamphlets, lending libraries, book clubs, and, of course, the meetings of alliances and suballiances themselves. All of these components were geared to increasing the individual and collective power farmers had over their own lives. In part, this cooperative process of self-education was about disseminating useful information—providing information about "business intelligence," for example, how liens and mortgages worked, or scientific and technological improvements in agricultural production, but also detailed discussions of political economy and political theory. Populist newspapers such as *The American Nonconformist, The Appeal to Reason, The Southern Mercury, The People's Party Paper*, and *The Progressive Farmer* were filled with articles on tax policy, commercial regulation, the financial and monetary system, but also on American history and political theory, cooking tips, and home economics. Readers of these newspapers were addressed as active participants in a collective struggle to take back control of their lives and restore the promise of a threatened democratic egalitarianism. Through reading these papers and through participating in the alliances, attending the lectures, and celebrating

the movement in parades and fairs, these farmers came to see themselves as a part of a broader struggle. As Goodwyn writes, through these activities a new sense of political possibility took shape, even a "sweeping new sense of what politics was" (Goodwyn, 1976: 51).

The central term of American Populism, and the term that best describes the "new sense" of politics emerging from its democratic experimentalism, was cooperation. It was, as Evan Jones wrote, "the true principle on which the advancement of civilization depends" (Postel, 2009). Populists opposed cooperation to the "combination" and "consolidation" associated with growing monopolies of industrial capitalism, and also to the "competition" embraced by the right-wing social Darwinist theories that legitimated them. They also distinguished cooperation from communism and the abolition of private property. Cooperation was used in various ways by Populists, and applied to different regions of social life—in economic relations of production and distribution, for example, and in political relations of suballiance associations and ultimately in the People's Party—but across these different applications the term always emphasized practical reciprocity, egalitarian interdependence, and mutual responsibility. Cooperation was a way of understanding egalitarian relations of mutual support in public without fusing individuality into a single collective identity, or all self-interest into a common interest.

However, even more important than the term was the practical enactment of cooperation in the many associations set up under the rubric of the Alliance; Goodwyn is surely right to note that "the central educational tool of the Farmers Alliance was the cooperative experiment itself" (Goodwyn, 1976: 110). The many faces of this cooperative experiment engendered a practical understanding of the extent to which individual freedom and independence required common effort and coordination. The sense of equal reciprocity coupled with the power it engendered was often expressed by the Populists themselves. As the Alliance president Leonidis Polk declared in 1890, a central goal of the Alliance was to "educate in the mutual relations and reciprocal duties between each other, as brethren, as neighbors, as members of society" (Mitchell, 1987: 10). According to the *Declaration of Purposes of the National Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union* the network of associations would "break up the habits of farmers, improve their social condition, increase their social pleasures, and strengthen their confidence in and friendship for each other" (Garvin and Daws, 1887: 76). More than a coherent ideology or ideal, cooperation was a multifaceted practice that shaped the Populist vision of the reformed democratic state for which they struggled. When traveling lecturers regularly referred to the Alliance as a "schoolroom," it was as much this cooperative experience to which they referred as it was the various lessons and information imparted. The democratic world envisioned by the alliances took shape through the democratic organization they participated in and cooperatively built.

In this sense, American Populism offers an important historical example of what some contemporary social theorists and activists call the world-building praxis of "prefigurative politics" or "prefigurative action" (Graeber, 2009). As Marianne Maeckelbergh writes, "prefigurative politics" enacts a "conflation of movement ends

and means; it is an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society" (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 302). The alliances were associations for coordinating popular power from below, they were practical sites of political subjectivization more than simply incubators of class consciousness, and this subjectivization is poorly understood in the simple terms of a qualitative identification with "the people" opposed to "the elites." Essential to the experience of nineteenth-century American Populism was what Elizabeth Sanders calls its "desperate inventions": their practical experimentation with building cooperative institutions that could enact and sustain popular authority over economic, cultural, and political life in the face of powerful opposing forces (Sanders, 1999). These desperate inventions and experiments in democratic enactment do not exemplify vital moments of popular identification so much as they do the hard work of creating alternative institutions to organize and sustain popular power in the face of a political and economic system geared to creating and reproducing radical inequalities of power and resources. As such, they must also be understood as formative sites of political subjectivization. The academic distinction between grassroots political organization, on the one hand, and the textured dimensions of political subject formation, on the other, is a heuristic abstraction. The experience of American Populism reveals the extent to which these registers of analysis were richly interconnected in practice, and conceptualized this way by the theorist activists of the movement. Democratic theorists could learn important lessons from their example.

Populism's practical cultivation of collective agency and demotic power is almost entirely missing from discussions of populism in contemporary democratic theory. Goodwyn's thick description of Populism's "movement culture" offers a powerful antidote to the formalism of many contemporary accounts. According to Goodwyn, Populism was:

> first and most centrally, a cooperative movement that imparted a sense of self-worth to individual people and that provided them with the instruments of self-education about the world they lived in. The movement gave them hope—a shared hope—that they were not impersonal victims of a gigantic industrial engine ruled by others but that they were, instead, people who could perform specific acts of self-determination. The movement taught its participants who they were and what their rights were and the people of the movement thereupon created its program and its strategy . . . Populism was, at bottom, a movement of ordinary Americans to gain control over their own lives and futures. (Goodwyn, 1976: 196)

This essay's focus on the importance of populism's forms of institutional experimentation need not replace the more familiar emphasis democratic theorists have placed on the political dilemmas of popular identity and "the boundary problem." Indeed, there are good reasons to see these issues as closely related. Political contestation around who the people are has been historically entangled with contestation around how the people act, how their will is represented, or institutionally embodied. A more detailed

investigation by democratic theorists of populism as a historical phenomenon might lead to productive examinations of this important relationship—"the boundary problem" and "the enactment problem"—and away from the intransigent ideological oppositions that have long defined it.

Note

1   The following sketch of nineteenth-century American Populism necessarily overlooks significant divergences and disagreements within the movement based in geography, ideology, partisanship, and, perhaps most decisively, race. Goodwyn's book offers a lively account of these disagreements while also attempting—persuasively, in my view—to derive a broader conclusion about the central meaning of Populism's "movement culture." I have relied on his book in this account and in my presentation of the corrective it offers to approaches to populism in contemporary democratic theory.

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