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In this informal note - in reality, a working paper to be discussed by activists - I should like to approach Southern Populism in a blunt fashion, one that strips away the sentimentality too often surrounding sacred radical cows. The best way to profit from historical experience is not to twist it into the shape we would like, not to use it merely to buttress our values and preconceived notions; rather, we must call the shots as they occurred, and then let the chips fall accordingly. All of us reading this are committed to racial and economic democracy, and yet, I would suggest that no useful purpose can be served by making the Populists out to be the proponents for total equality that they were not. We want diagnosis and analysis, as opposed to the self-congratulatory exercise of dipping into the past for some splendid precedent here and some eloquent rhetoric there.

Thus, at this point in my researching and thinking on Populism in the South, I would make this general observation: it is comparatively simple, if one remains on the level of rhetoric, to demonstrate the progressive (and at times radical) character of the movement. Those of you who have read C. Van Woodward's fine studies, and these are the indispensable starting point, will have already found ample documentation of a groping toward racial justice, and an attack on both the national and regional structure of power. And indeed, Mr. Woodward has gone well beyond the level of Populist rhetoric in describing not only the harshness of life, the antidemocratic political framework, and the deprivations attached to political and social dissent, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the character of the southern political economy -- its essentially colonial status, its primary-material stage, its impoverishment at the hands of northern capitalism and commercial penetration. As a preliminary statement, then, one can say that Southern Populism responded to the fundamental problems confronting the society and times: a one-party political framework which reinforced, and was reinforced by, a system of segregation; and an economy based upon a high degree of wealth-concentration, business domination of state and local governments, the intensification of tenantry, and the continued deprivation of whites and blacks alike. And, Populists not simply responded, but did so with a remarkable degree of courage, and with greater insight than is generally supposed.

But, we cannot let the matter rest here. Too many questions must still be asked -- not only of the evidence, but of ourselves. For, what precisely are we looking for? What constitutes a valid test of radicalism? Shall primary importance, in formulating our criteria, be attached to race, to economic demands, to the potentialities for structure changes, or what? In sum, to string together a number of quotations indicating sympathy with Negro rights (and perhaps shelve the more ambiguous statements), may give us a sense of encouragement, but hardly contribute to a realistic appraisal of the difficulties involved, for the present and future as well as the past, in fashioning a Negro-white coalition to democratize the society. What I state now may surprise you, but I ask you to consider it carefully. If we skip over all of the incidents (e.g. the fact that white farmers in Georgia rode all night to protect a Negro Populist from being lynched) and political statements that most of us are familiar with, and turn instead to the objective consequences of Southern Populist activity, this is the overall picture, at least to the extent that I am able to make it out.

First, Populists were not necessarily pro-Negro in attitudes, particularly when viewed from a present-day perspective. Indeed, from the standpoint of rhetoric alone, one might be inclined to label them as anti-Negro. That is, they accepted the pattern of segregation and seldom, if ever, spoke out in favor of complete social equality. I recognize that this may appear to undermine the thesis of Populism as the high point in racial cooperation in the South. Yet, and precisely here is where the analysis - and the movement itself - must be seen in a more complex light, the moment we go beyond rhetoric to consequences we find that, if anything, Southern Populism emerges as a decidedly more positive force than has been recognized.

Just on the matter of race (and race, I need not say, cannot be divorced from economic and political considerations), Populists adopted a position that was brutally frank, quite harsh-sounding to today's liberals' ears, but in the last analysis, profoundly radical. Let me term this a politics of realism. They were interested, not in racial equality but in reform. And they sensed the crucial truth which still is not sufficiently realized:

that segregation was a political device, artificially engendered by the dominant groups in the South, to prevent the lower classes, Negro and white alike, from coalescing to challenge and in the process transform, the political and economic foundations of Southern society. And they not only sensed, but acted upon, that insight. Their own attitudes were not cast off overnight, but their actions were geared to the recognition that racial appeals and reform were antithetical elements. Thus, they stated time and again, in the words of Marion Butler of North Carolina, that 'the politician has killed every reform by crying negro'. There is no presumption of equality here, but there is a categorical rejection of race politics, and with that the understanding that unless racial appeals are relegated to the sidelines, the poorer whites stand no chance whatever to improve their condition.

Self-interest is not ordinarily the stuff, the raw material, for molding humane sentiments or transforming the social system; but when self-interest becomes viewed in class terms, as was the case with the Populists, then a counter-current is set up against the prevailing practices and values -- the counter-current which began to embrace Negroes, not as Negroes but as members of the poor. I know you will recall Thomas E. Watson's statement, 'You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both.' In addressing himself in this manner to whites and Negroes alike, Watson was urging that a politics of class or of realism must take the place of a politics of race -- that, in a word, race must be made irrelevant to Southern society.

And here, the first step was to insure full political equality for the Negro. In Butler's words, 'The negro is a citizen, he is guaranteed a vote by the constitution, and it is our sworn duty to allow him to cast that vote and to count it honestly.' I find this sentiment to be extremely important. It indicates a direct confrontation with the Southern folk-community concept: that all whites are equal because they are white, an argument which of course is designed to force lower class whites to submerge class differences and grievances in the name of white supremacy. That denial of their own interests, and consequently the consolidation of the framework of domination, can only be accomplished through the charge of Negro domination in the event of a split in white ranks, and the further charge of Negro inferiority. By insisting upon political justice for Negroes, not only is the conception of Negro inferiority undermined, but the folk community begins to break apart along class lines.

Significantly, all three quotations noted above occurred in 1892, that is the first year when the People's party actually assumed definite form throughout the South. This was, then, only the beginning of their comprehension of the dynamics of independent politics. Populists were white southerners with racial prejudice who sought to transcend that prejudice in order to attain economic reforms. But as the movement proceeded, race receded more and more into the background; the emphasis was upon political equality, and through cooperation, mutual struggle and a growing awareness of the nature of the society, there was clearly a potential, sometimes actually realized, for breaking down barriers and enhancing human dignity. The initial position was that of self-interest, but it soon became apparent that discrimination and intimidation applied against Negroes would also be applied against whites who challenged the political and economic framework. Indeed, Populists were now recognizing that their own emancipation could not be attained without the emancipation of Negroes as well. Again, let me state, the stress was not upon Negro rights but upon political freedom and economic democracy -- and rather than resort to race-baiting to try to neutralize the attack of the dominant groups, Populists made the conscious choice to repudiate that in favor of discussing and acting upon the economic issues facing them. It is this repudiation, I suggest, that represented a starting point toward social sanity and rational political life.

The rhetoric might put us off, but the concrete activity does not. For an all too brief moment (brief because all the forces of repression were directed against them, until the movement was finally fragmented and destroyed), the racial climate in the South was immeasurably improved. Social equality was not mentioned, but a good deal else was: most Populists vehemently opposed the Mississippi constitutional convention of 1890 and later moves toward disfranchisement; most Populists spoke out clearly against lynching; and most Populists sought the kind of economic changes which would benefit both races alike.

And this brings me to the second observation, that on the economic demands and the larger challenge to the existing structure of Southern society. Populist economic protest, generally speaking, was not as radical as in the Midwest: the Jeffersonian heritage did

have a way of setting limits upon semi-collectivist principles. (Yet, I think Staughton Lynd, in an earlier article, underestimates the resiliency of that heritage -- not on social, but on economic matters. Even 'Cyclone' Davis, by far the most Jeffersonian-oriented in the total movement, nonetheless found there the basis for arguing in favor of government ownership of the railroads. The point is not what Jefferson said or did, but how the Populists employed him for their own purposes.) Yet, while Southern Populists were more reformist than radical, even this proved to be an unsettling factor in the contemporary setting. Any challenge to the dominant groups in the South was greeted as a threat to white supremacy, and hence not only contributed further to the fissure in the folk-community but directly called into question the appropriateness of a one-party political framework dedicated to business ends. I will not attempt to cover the numerous Populist proposals, but will merely record that they asserted the principle that the government, state and more particularly national, must be responsive to social well-being. Populists knew from their own experience that economic conservatism was closely related to oligarchical political rule and the politics of race; and, their endeavor to democratize the economic system would have had as a consequence - if the movement had succeeded - a larger democratization for Southern society.

Thus, to the degree that they were prepared to stand for economic reforms and for a liberalizing of the political framework, Populists acted directly to dismantle the entire apparatus of social control, economic domination, and the racial hysteria which underscored both of these factors. And in the process, the Negro stood to gain -- in part as a Negro, but also as a member of the impoverished class. My point, simply, is this: when I suggested earlier that we must divest our appraisal of sentimentality, I had in mind that one must not judge a social movement by its expressions of love, so much as by the humanistic consequences of its protest. For the latter can well create the potentiality for still further gains, and ultimately for the kind of social ethic that ideally should be, but often is not, there from the start. Populist protest appears rather prosaic in the light I have sketched, but sometimes the most earnest struggles occur in perfectly understandable, and even drab, terms. They were building a movement from the ground up, and the lack of tangible results should not be permitted to obscure the fact that a decisive step was taken in the direction of human rights. Self-interest may have been their formula, but it was an honest one, and one that held out the possibility for social change, for greater self-awareness, and for progressively moving toward the acceptance of the Negro as a fellow human being. Let me close with a statement which was very much on the grass-roots level, in this case from a Burgaw, N.C. paper. 'What is good for a white laborer in the South and West is equally as good for the colored laborer, and why should they not vote the vote the same way? Capital is organized, and why should not labor be organized? As long as the toiling masses remain divided because of appeals to race prejudice and party love, so long will they be at the mercy of organized capital.' Hence, it argued that there cannot be a government responsive to the needs of the people until racial appeals are eliminated: 'When so much prejudice ceases to exist and principle towers above party we may look for a government run in the interest of the people and not before.' The emphasis is upon realism, upon class -- and upon justice.

