

American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898. By Robert C. McMath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993. Pp. vi, 245. Bibliographical essay, index. \$30.00.)

Deserving wide adoption as a text or supplementary course reading because of its clarity, comprehensiveness, and length (208 short pages plus a 20-page bibliography, but no footnotes), this fascinating overview by the author of the standard history of the Farmers' Alliance demonstrates the limits of a cultural approach to Populism. Sympathetic to the Populists' humane impulses but critical of them for alleged racism and sexism, McMath believes that they were doomed to failure because they represented the preindustrial "republican" ideology of "producerism" and because they could not sustain a "movement culture" or transform or surmount their language of protest once they entered the gritty political arena of posturing and compromise. Drawing many of their ideas from Jacksonian trade unionists and contemporary intellectuals, and appealing (McMath thinks) more to farmers' desire for independence than to their self-interest, the Populists were anachronistic in the world of industrial capitalism, not forerunners of Progressivism and the New Deal, as John D. Hicks contended.

McMath's cultural interpretation (the word "culture" appears in two of the six chapter titles) no doubt explains why two-thirds of the

book's pages are devoted to the years before the founding of the Populist party. The excitement is in the movement, the personalities of the early organizers, the Alliance meetings and interactions, the period of promise and hope, not in the political bargaining and plotting, the transformation of vague notions into viable party platforms, the period of accomplishment and failure. Thirty-one pages set the scene for the Alliance, rural southern and western society after the Civil War, and 31 more summarize the history of Populism after the first national election (1892) that the party contested. Although McMath tells us a good deal about the development of southern sharecropping and the Great Plains land boom, he provides only the briefest glimpses of the programs of state governments in North Carolina, Kansas, and Colorado that the Populists or fusion parties actually controlled. This skewed emphasis is both a sign of the late twentieth-century popular distaste for and lack of interest in politics and a product of the professional reflection of that mood, the decline of political history.

McMath's cultural understanding of Populism begs three important questions: Why did the party arise when it did and not earlier or later? Why did it appeal to some voters and not others? And why did it adopt the platforms that it did? If Populism was just a rural version of republican producerism, why did it flourish in the 1890s, instead of in the 1870s or 1930s? Why didn't more eastern and mid-western farmers and skilled workers back the party, and why did southern farmers split? Why, if their forbearers were the Jacksonian sloganeers of limited government and equal rights, were the Populists' two most distinctive policy positions the subtreasury and Greenback or silver inflationism, both of which required vigorous central government action on behalf of special interests? When McMath approaches questions like these, he falls back on rather standard economic or political factors—the drought in the Great Plains and the rise in railroad freight rates in the late 1880s shoved farmers into independent politics, variations in the responses of the dominant parties in each state to the Alliance and early farmer political parties explain the third party's differential patterns of success from state to state, and the difficulties of operating inter-party coalitions with the Republicans in one region and the Democrats in another partly account for its demise. But nowhere does McMath set out a comprehensive economic or political interpretation of Populism or devote to either set of forces the loving detail that he lavishes on cultural factors.

McMath has accurately and often masterfully synthesized the trends in much of the last generation of scholarship on Populism, including his own important contributions. Lively and succinct, his book will instantly become the undergraduate and even graduate text of choice on the subject. But like so much current cultural-intellectual

history, *American Populism* offers a blurred and partial vision of politics. It is not that the topics that he and other recent scholars stress are unimportant or uninteresting, but rather that they are not the whole story of politics, or even the most important part of it. Struggle may be ennobling and ideas, entrancing, but in the final analysis democratic politics comes down to winning elections, passing programs, and carrying them out, to "who gets what, when, where, and how," in Harold Lasswell's famous phrase. Until historians relearn the fact that politics is centrally concerned with power, how it is seized or preserved, and what is done with it, we will fail to understand Populism or any other political movement or party fully.

J. MORGAN KOUSSER
California Institute of Technology

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