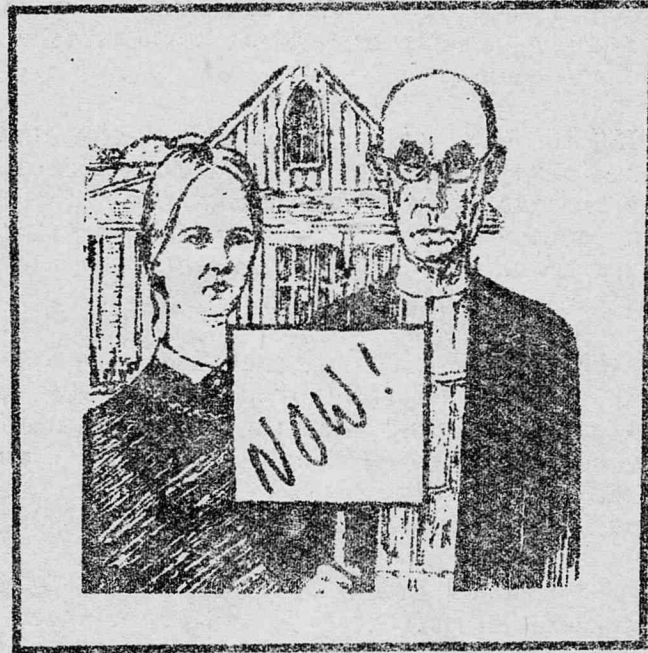


Southern Populism



b y

Norman Pollack

10¢

SOUTHERN STUDENT ORGANIZING COMMITTEE P.O. BOX 6403 NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

THE SOUTHERN STUDENT ORGANIZING COMMITTEE is an association of young, concerned Southerners dedicated to social change.

WE WISH TO JOIN with other individuals and groups in building a democratic society predicated on peace and racial and sexual equality; a society in which every person is guaranteed physical well-being and the opportunity to develop to the fullest extent his native abilities.

SSOC AFFIRMS THE RIGHT of each individual to participate in the decision-making processes in those social, economic and political areas which directly influence his life. We envision a world dedicated to free speech and unfettered inquiry; a community of love and cooperation in an economy of abundance.

SSOC WAS FOUNDED in the belief that the fulfillment of this vision will require radical changes in many of America's present institutions and prevailing attitudes. We will continually seek new avenues to encourage these transformations.

SSOC WAS FOUNDED in the belief that the South has special problems which create difficulties--and opportunities--for a Southern movement for social change; SSOC will devote a substantial proportion of its resources to the solution of these problems. We also believe that the South possesses valuable traditions, in both black and white cultures, which will enable Southerners to make a unique contribution to a truly democratic America.

--PREAMBLE
SSOC Constitution

SOUTHERN POPULISM

by

Norman Pollack

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 Mr. 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 its 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 structural 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 contributes 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 over-all 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 ordinarily not 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, in 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, which 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 of 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, North Carolina 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 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.

LITERATURE LIST
SOUTHERN STUDENT ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

DOMESTIC ISSUES

- .25 ___ Youth as a Class.
JOHN & MARGARET ROWNTREE.
- .25 ___ Toward a Female Liberation
Movement.
BEVERLY JONES & JUDITH BROWN.
- .10 ___ Freedom for Movement Girls--Now.
VANAUKEN.
- .10 ___ Medical Ghettos.
ANSELM L. STRAUSS.
- .10 ___ Our Prisons are Criminal.
BRUCE JACKSON.
- .10 ___ The Angry Children of Malcolm X.
JULIUS LESTER.
- .10 ___ Power and Racism.
STOKELY CARMICHAEL.
- .10 ___ An Analysis of American Racism.
FRANK H. JOYCE.
- .10 ___ The Legacy of Slavery & the Roots
of Black Nationalism.
EUGENE GENOVESE.
- .10 ___ Farewell to Integration.
W. H. FERRY.
- .10 ___ BLACK POWER: Reprint of a Paper
by the SNCC Vine City Project
- .10 ___ How to Commit Revolution.
WILLIAM DOMHOFF.
- .10 ___ Decline of American Radicalism
in the 20th Century.
GABRIEL KOLKO.
- .10 ___ The New Nonviolence.
DAVID DELLINGER.
- .10 ___ A Conversation: Jobs, Machines,
& People. ROBERT THEOBALD,
GERARD PIEL & RALPH HELSTEIN.
- .10 ___ The Cybernation Revolution.
ROBERT THEOBALD.
- .10 ___ Mississippi's Economics and
Mississippi's "New Image".
MIKE BRULAND.
- .10 ___ The Decay of American Cities.
PERCIVAL GOODMAN.
- .10 ___ The Power of the Dixiecrats.
TOM HAYDEN.
- .10 ___ This is War? (The Poverty
Program). ROBB BURLAGE.
- .10 ___ The Peace Called War. Lyndon
Johnson's Poverty Program.
DAVID NOLAN.
- .10 ___ The Survey and Community
Organizing. NICK EGLESON.
- .10 ___ Finding and Making Leaders.
NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN.
- .10 ___ Over 30: (On Working With Adults)
ELIZABETH TORNQUIST.

SSOC'S HANDBOOK & SPEAKER'S GUIDE

- .15 ___ SSOC's Handbook. (2nd edition)
- .10 ___ SSOC's Speaker's Guide.

UNIVERSITY REFORM

- .10 ___ Toward a Student Syndicalist
Movement. CARL DAVIDSON
- .10 ___ The Multiversity. CARL DAVIDSON.
- .10 ___ The Campus Protest Against ROTC.
ALLAN BRICK.
- .10 ___ University Reform: A Platform
Statement. ALAN OGDEN.
- .10 ___ Who Runs the Schools. BILL TOWE.
- .10 ___ Towards a Black University.
KEITH LOWE.
- .10 ___ The Future of Negro Colleges.
RICHARD ROBBINS.
- .10 ___ What is Wrong With Negro Colleges
J. RAYMOND HODKINSON.
- .10 ___ An End to History. MARIO SAVIO.
- .10 ___ University of the Status Quo.
DAVID NOLAN.
- .10 ___ Student Social Action.
TOM HAYDEN.
- .10 ___ High School Reform. MARK KLEIMAN
- .10 ___ Academic Freedom in the
Secondary Schools. ACLU.
- .10 ___ Freedom School Notes.
JANE STEMBRIDGE.

POWER STRUCTURE RESEARCH

- .10 ___ Political Meddling & the Florida
Board of Regents. ALAN LEVIN.
- .10 ___ The Duke Trustees and Labor.
MIKE SMEDBERG.
- .10 ___ Suggestions for a Study of Your
Hometown. ROBERT K. LAMB.
- .10 ___ Care and Feeding of the Power
Structure. JACK MINNIS.
- .10 ___ How to Research the Democratic
Party. LEE WEBB.
- .10 ___ How to Select Targets to Disrupt
the Empire.
EDIE BLACK & LOIS REIVICH.
- .10 ___ NASHVILLE: A Preliminary Study
of the Power Structure.
DAVE & RONDA KOTELCHUCK.

APPALACHIA

- .10 ___ Southern Mountain Folk Tradition
and the Folksong "Stars"
Syndrome. CALLIE CANTREL &
LUKE LARMON.
- Folk Heroes & Protest. D.T.
- .10 ___ Deliberate Depopulation of Whole
Areas. (Appalachia)
ALBERT SOLNIT.
- .20 ___ Poverty & Affluence in Appalachia
HARRY M. CAUDILL
West Virginia Wonderland.
WILLIAM C. BLIZZARD.
- Introduction to both papers -
DON WEST.

FOREIGN POLICY AND VIETNAM

- .10 Chinese Aggression: Myth or Menace. CHARLES S. BURCHILL.
- .25 Declaration at His Court Martial. REGIS DEBRAY.
- .10 Message to the Tri-Continental Congress. CHE GUEVARA.
- .10 The Argument of Latin America. CARLOS FUENTES.
- .10 CUBA: The Revolution Not Seen. DAVID DELLINGER.
- .10 BLACK POWER and the Third World. STOKELY CARMICHAEL.
- .05 Vietnam: (Paper prepared by members of JOIN)
- .10 Vietnam: The Myth & Reality of American Policy. DAVID NOLAN.
- .10 Political Program of the N.L.F.
- .10 Vietnam and Civil Rights. BOB PARRIS & HOWARD ZINN.
- .10 Dow Shalt Not Kill. HOWARD ZINN.
- .10 Trial of Dr. Howard Levy. IRA GLASSER.
- .10 The New Left in Germany & Japan. MANFRED BUDDEBERG & KEN CLOKE
- .10 America Needs an Agonizing Reappraisal. ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE
- .10 Contemporary Forms of Imperialism CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN.
- .10 On Revolution. STANLEY MILLET.
- .10 Scarce Resources: The Dynamic of American Imperialism. HEATHER DEAN.

SOUTHERN RADICALISM SERIES

- .10 Southern Tenant Farmers Union. H. L. MITCHELL
- .10 Negro Slave Revolts. HERBERT APTHEKER.
- .10 Southern Populism. NORMAN POLLACK.
- .10 Black Mountain College ROGER A. WICKER

THE DRAFT

- .10 Selective Service System OR the Manpower Channelers. PETER HENIG.
- .10 Channeling (Unedited, Official Selective Service Memo.)
- .10 Draft Counseling Centers.
- .10 Emigration to Canada: Legal Notes for Draft Age Men.

LABOR

- .10 Davy Crockett in Little Egypt. (Lawrenceburg Tn. Labor Strike) VERA RONY.
- .10 A Brief History of Duke Local 77. PETER BRANDON & NANCY PARKS.
- .10 BLUE RIDGE: Strike Against Levi Strauss. BRENDA MULL.
- .10 Students, Labor, and the South JIM WILLIAMS.

SOUTHERN STUDENT ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

P. O. Box 6403, Nashville, Tennessee, 37212
Telephone: (615) 291-3537

____ Enclosed is _____ for the pamphlets checked.

____ Enclosed is _____ for _____ SSOC Buttons. (.25 cents each).

____ Mobilize the South. Stars and Bars in design of Peace Symbol
____ Confederate Flag with Black and White Handclasp.

____ A Free University in a Free South.

____ Enclosed is \$3.00 for a years subscription to SSOC's monthly newspaper, THE PHOENIX.

____ Sample copy free upon request.

____ Enclosed is \$4.00 for a subscription to SSOC's magazine, THE NEW SOUTH STUDENT.

____ Write for sample copy.

____ Enclosed is \$5.00 for membership in SSOC which includes subscriptions to both THE PHOENIX & THE NEW SOUTH STUDENT.

____ Please send me additional information about SSOC.

____ Please send me information concerning Bulk Literature Orders.

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Make checks payable to SSOC. Contributions for postage and handling are appreciated.

Literature List compiled January 22, 1969. When ordering literature, please use the most current list available.