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Article Summary: The hard times of the 1890s united farmers and small-town businessmen in a Populist alliance. When prosperity revived, that temporary alliance between Main Street and the farm fell apart. Leaders of small-town Progressivism may have been ex-Populists from Main Street.

*Scroll down for complete article.*

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## A NOTE ON THE POLITICS OF POPULISM

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FOR a decade and more historians have been re-examining the agrarian radicalism of the late nineteenth century which culminated in the Populist Revolt. Scholars have delved deeply into the relations between agrarian radicalism, the labor movement, and the politics of the Progressive Era. They have shown particular interest in the intellectual history of the movement. Depth studies of agrarian radicalism in regions, states, and local areas have drawn attention to significant variations from place to place. The result has been a considerable accumulation of additional information and insight, along with a stimulating controversy among the proponents of conflicting interpretations.

This Note puts forth an hypothesis dealing with the political dynamics of the agrarian revolt at the local level suggested to the author by various straws in the wind noted in the new literature. This hypothesis has not been explored in depth by the scholars of the protest movement.

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If this hypothesis should receive a sufficient test, it might well assist in reaching a consensus on the nature and meaning of the agrarian revolt. It stresses the changing relationship between *bona fide* farmers living in the countryside and middle-class merchants and professionals living in the small towns which served as commercial-financial centers for local areas. The most relevant arena in which to test this hypothesis would be research in state and local history—perhaps primarily in local history.

The initial phase of the agrarian revolt during the 1870's and 1880's encompassed the activities of the Granges and the Alliances. These organizations were primarily *pressure groups*, applying external pressure on the major parties in order to secure reforms deemed beneficial to the farmer. The early movements appear to have been supported and led primarily by farmers themselves, although they were not without some outside assistance. The farmers who became Grangers and Alliance men attributed much of their distress to the repressive policies foisted upon the country by business interests working through the major parties. Farmers were intensely antagonistic to the operations of business on two levels—the small business in the local commercial-financial center and the large business of an interstate character which reached out to the small-town centers—especially transportation and processing industries with central offices in the large metropolises to the East and North.

By and large, available evidence shows that the Grangers and Alliance men encountered extensive opposition from local businessmen as well as the "big business" excoriated in the literature of the protest movement. Local businessmen were to be found in the ranks of both major parties. Generally speaking, neither the Republicans nor the Democrats were willing to take a firm stand in behalf of *bona fide* farmers insofar as their relations with business—small or large, local or interstate—was concerned. The farmers assumed a pervasive economic tie, and therefore a powerful community of interest, between local businessmen



Populist Convention at Columbus, Nebraska July 15, 1890



70753. Anselmo Neb.

Main Street Anselmo, Custer County, Nebraska

and big business. The combined opposition of small and large business usually proved strong enough to frustrate agrarian reforms. In these circumstances, farmers became increasingly alienated from the major parties which seemed to them vehicles for business oppression, and at the same time they lost confidence in pressure-group tactics. These trends were especially apparent as the Eighties ran their course. Farm organizations acting as pressure groups could make little or no headway either with the Stalwart Republicans or the Bourbon Democrats.

At this point agrarian protest received new impetus from the particularly dramatic downturn in the business cycle which culminated in the Panic of 1893. Farmers had generally experienced hard times since the Panic of 1873. A new element in the situation, however, bade fair to alter the course of agrarian protest. It was the onset of severe economic problems not only for farmers but also for small business in the market centers. The small businessmen in these towns tended to attribute their difficulties to the domination of the large business concerns in the more easterly and northerly metropolises with whom they had earlier enjoyed good relationships—mutually beneficial relationships in terms of profits. As hard times hit the small towns anti-big business feeling increased, and it gave impetus to “anti-monopoly” factions in the Republican Party and anti-Bourbon factions in the Democratic party. Generally speaking, neither of these movements could hope to capture its party nationally. This frustration naturally tended to impel significant numbers of small-town businessmen into the rising vehicle of farm protest—the Populist Party.

Nothing makes friends of old enemies like common dangers. The ancient antagonism between Main Street and the countryside declined as old enemies attributed their difficulties to the same source—big business. It is entirely possible that many local Populist organizations were coalitions of Main Street businessmen and farmers. The businessmen brought to Populism much of its political know-how and leadership. Experience gained in the old parties

was put to work in behalf of Populism. Historians have frequently failed to recognize that in the context of hard times during the Nineties, the political objectives of the farmers were often the political objectives of Main Street business. The extensive shift away from pressure-group activity to partisan politics which developed in the Nineties may be accounted for not simply because of the prior failure of agrarian pressure groups but also because of the influence of apostates from the old parties who lived in the small towns and lent support to Populism.

The decline of Populism at the local level was related to the beginning of "fusion" or cooperation with one of the two major parties. Some evidence suggests that fusion often was inaugurated at the behest of small-town business leadership in the Populist ranks rather than the farmers. The Populist breakdown was a function not simply of the electoral defeat in 1896, but also of returning prosperity after 1897. Prosperity in the small towns revived the old antagonisms between Main Street and the countryside. The temporary community of interest between Main Street and the farm forged during hard times fell apart when local conflicts of interest once again emerged. As Main Street Populists bolted and returned to the old parties, the farmers they left behind repudiated party politics and manifested new interest in pressure tactics. Fortunately for the farmers, their economic condition improved measurably during the general prosperity which endured to the time of World War I. Farmers also benefitted from the activity of the two major parties during the Progressive Era. It is possible that the leaders of small-town Progressivism were often ex-Populists of the Main Street variety.

Much has been written about the attempt to forge a national farmer-labor coalition through the Populist Party. It could be that in many local instances, a far more significant phenomenon was the short-lived alliance of Main Street businessmen and farmers. If it turns out that a significant number of Main Street Progressives who worked within the confines of the two major parties during the

Roosevelt-Wilson era had Populist affiliations earlier, the case would then be strengthened for the theory that there is a definite continuity in the transition from Populism to Progressivism.

Historians now working on the complexities of agrarian protest might well perform a valuable service if they tested the foregoing hypothesis. Whether or not the hypothesis holds up, it seems likely that the testing would produce some significant additional insight into the grass roots politics of one of the most important and most controversial movements in American history. The fugitive evidence in recent studies of agrarian protest suggests that the hypothesis is sufficiently plausible to warrant a serious investigation.