The following address was part of a session on "Political Reform: The Age of Populism" at the 124th annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society on October 20 at the Hilton Hotel, St. Paul. The session was chaired by Rhoda R. Gilman and also included a paper, "Humaneness and the Limits of Reform," by Norman Pollack. The all-day meeting was conducted in conjunction with the society's first Public Affairs Conference, marking the sixth year of operation of the MHS Public Affairs Center, established in 1967.

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Our generation of Americans lives in an era of intense social criticism. Little in our political and economic system escapes assessment, and even the technique of the critics is the subject of debate. In fact, much of the recent discussion about peace, prejudice, and poverty has been buried in arguments about whether the critics were working within the system. Little wonder, then, that some of the social critics, both left and right — frustrated because they felt that they could not get action — became radicals, challenging the validity of the electoral process, impugning the impartiality of American justice, and accepting conspiracy theories. Today's radicals tend to identify problems as Gordian knots to be cut or logjams to be dynamited, rather than as subtle but not intractable aspects of a complex society. And incidentally, not all of these critics are necessarily out of power; as the Watergate investigation discloses, the executive branch of the government contained men who demonstrated considerable impatience and an unusual distrust of the system.

Although it is fashionable to say that this is characteristic of each generation, it was not true in the Gilded Age. The issues of an increasingly urban, industrial, and ethically and religiously pluralistic society were rarely debated at the national level, but at the local level they received enormous importance, especially pluralism, because the question of personal liberty laws dominated American politics. Temperance, the secular sabbath, and the status of parochial schools became key cohesive forces in formulating American political understandings. These cultural issues cut across economic class lines. The saloon, the sabbath, and the school separated Catholic and Methodist, regardless of vocation or economic status. The Democratic party — the party of personal liberty — welcomed Roman Catholics and consented to parochial schools, welcomed Lutherans and accepted the continental sabbath, and agreed that alcohol was a personal issue. The Republican party, aware of its New England Protestant tradition, remained the party of the antislavery crusade and other reform causes, and when its members sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," this song had a special meaning for them.

The issues that received public attention in this period — currency, the tariff, civil service reform, national expansion, and laissez faire — lacked partisan character because Republicans and Democrats shared common views about them. For this reason there was as much agreement among members of one party about these issues as there was agreement with the opposition on the issues. Social criticism, as implicit in these national questions, was an intra-rather than an interparty question. Admit-
tedly there were dissenting voices at the end of the nineteenth century. Socialists of various stripes raised economic issues; currency reformers attempted to enlist farmers and workers during times of financial distress; and temperance advocates beckoned the voters who endorsed controlling human vices.

TO UNDERSTAND the nature and the contribution of Populist social criticism, it should be compared with the best-known and most articulate social criticism before the rise of Populism: the work of the American Mugwumps. Primarily Republicans, the Mugwumps were high-minded American liberals who lacked the humanitarianism of their English counterparts. The Mugwumps doubted the Negro's capacity to contribute to society, and the Mugwumps worked for civil service reform, a low tariff, restricted immigration, suppression of labor unions, and economic laissez faire. This was the liberal position. Distrusting democratic government, they viewed “politician” as a term of opprobrium. Mugwumps huddled in reform and sound money clubs, subscribed to their magazine, The Nation, and endorsed the philippics of its brilliant editor, Edwin L. Godkin, who was the premier thought-maker of the time.

Subtle and complex but flawed, Mugwump social criticism reflected their experience. Mugwumps considered themselves the moral and intellectual leaders of American society. They tried to lead that society, but they held themselves apart from it and from its political parties. When their advocacy of independent voting disrupted the Republican party, both in its loyalty and its organization, the Mugwumps refused to recognize that parties were integrating forces in society. Many Mugwump reform programs were aimed less at social amelioration than at social control. They were keenly aware of the cultural bases of American politics — the saloon, the sabbath, and the parochial school. Mugwumps, therefore, favored restrictive legislation aimed at controlling these forces and the people involved in them. Mugwumps consequently favored restricting immigration to contain the influence of Catholics, and they opposed measures like the Force Bill because they were willing to accommodate the South in its control of the Black.

But at heart the Mugwump was an economic determinist. Early in the Gilded Age, his targets had been monopolies and the irresponsible rich, but the strikes of the 1870s turned the criticism of the Mugwump to the man he described as “wild-eyed” who wanted to change the nature of things in America. Like Karl Marx, the Mugwump believed in an economic determinist factor in man’s behavior; but unlike Karl Marx, the Mugwump had no system of historical explanation. Therefore, the Mugwump reached a self-serving conclusion: Government should be by the best men, and the best men were the rich men. And, like most zealots, the Mugwumps never denied that they were part of the minority. How could it be otherwise? The best could never be the many, and, consequently, they welcomed their role as the leaders and the few.

The Mugwump’s style and rhetoric left little room for accommodation. Godkin was furious with Theodore Roosevelt when “Teddy,” trying to make a political fortune for himself, refused in 1884 to desert the politically corrupt Republican, James G. Blaine, for the privately corrupt Democrat, Grover Cleveland. (As you probably remember, Blaine allegedly took advantage of railroad money, and Cleveland allegedly took advantage of a lady’s good nature.) Godkin could not accept expediency. To him, neutrality was treason, inaction a crime, and silence unpardonable. Driven by rigid moral imperatives, Mugwumps isolated themselves from the main political currents of the day. The economic pressures of the 1890s not only frightened them into an irrational defense of the gold standard but also left them demoralized. As social critics, the Mugwumps failed.

THE POPULISTS were in some ways similar to the Mugwumps. They, too, at least at the outset, recruited heavily among New England reform types. They stressed independent political action, distrusted politicians, favored civil service reform, opposed monopoly, and tended to define man as an economic creature. But these similarities are not useful to an understanding of Populist social criticism because they do not explain Populism’s origin, development, and purpose. The salient point about Populism is that the social criticism which produced the party resulted directly from a major American depression — an economic disaster of enormous proportions. For its generation the shadow of the 1890s was as long and as deep as the shadow of the 1930s. That depression had a profound effect, and it spawned the Populist social criticism. Scholars today are still debating the causes of the depression of 1893. Its causes are really not germane to the criticism. But the impact of this depression was very selective and interesting. It was not universal, and in agriculture it was not restricted to particular crops or particular parts of the country. Farmers producing the same crops of similar value reacted differently to economic hardship. In fact, there is a good deal of evidence to indicate that it was not so much what a farmer produced, or where he lived, but who he was or what his expectations were that determined his behavior. It may well be that those farmers who expected the most reacted the most vigorously.

One thing is certain. By 1889 many southern and middle western farmers experienced great dissatisfaction and monumental disillusionment with America. The semi-isolated, undercapitalized southern farmers complained about banks, about railroads, about the cost of agricultural machinery. The middle western farmers, at
least some of them, shared these views; but farmers in Ohio and Indiana emphasized competition from far western farmers and unfair railroad rates that discriminated in favor of Minnesota farmers against Indiana and Ohio farmers. Most farmers knew that their problems were related to the impersonal factors of international industrial capitalism, but they also sensed that these factors were somehow less impersonal to bankers in London, Paris, and New York. And they felt that those who were closest to the centers of economic power had greater leverage than the isolated farmer alone on his land.

What came as a shock to many farmers, and what probably precipitated the nature of Populist social criticism, was the cool reception that the farmers received when they sought support at a local level. Urban and town leaders in the South and Middle West were committed to boosterism. For them, prosperity was contingent on new investment and new populations. That the gloomy preachments of despairing farmers, which sold short the opportunities of the Middle West and the New South, could discourage investors and settlers opened the chasm between the farmer and the town boomer.

Moreover, when town leadership spoke, especially in the press, it pointed out that working farmers — who lacked status in the North and family connections in the South — were hardly the "proper men" to provide leadership and imaginative direction to their communities. To make the farmer’s plight worse, as the depression deepened, he failed to develop specific programs for his well-being or to develop groups to espouse his cause. The only effective pressure groups that some farmers had ever joined were humanitarian reform and temperance societies. But this experience provided the farmer with little skill because, even when the style and the rhetoric of the reform societies served as models, as substructures in a social system, they proved inadequate for dealing with the massive economic disaster of the 1890s. Even farmers who had participated in the Grange, a decade or so earlier, realized its ineffectiveness.

IF ALIENATED PEOPLE feel that community leaders are not concerned with their needs, that their goals are elusive, that they cannot rely on their fellow men for aid, and that the operations of society are capricious, then many farmers in the Middle West and the South were alienated. That they would turn to politics was inevitable. This would be true in any complex society, but our particular form of government "formally" structures the conflict of interests into a struggle of partisan groups for power. The older parties, however, because of their nature, denied the farmer what he considered a fair hearing. This was true enough throughout the country to prevent the condition of agriculture from becoming a national partisan issue. In other words, during the 1890s, in the early part especially, the farmer was not the critical issue. Even in the late 1880s no one discussed the agricultural problem as a great issue. In a sense a division was taking place in society, and the party leaders were unable to respond to it. A division between the farmer and the competing booster element in society existed. The farmer — Republican or Democrat — was being separated from his party by the forces of the economic crisis.

This was a trying if not traumatic experience for the American farmer. Voter commitment had been upset a generation earlier by the coming of the Civil War. Although few voters thought about how immediately party affiliations affected their lives, the social norms associated with the saloon, the sabbath, and the school were integral parts of their daily experience. Frequently, these were what a man defended or attacked when he cast his ballot. He may have voted for a presi-

the criticism required intensity, the product of a zealot’s enthusiasm that would prompt a man to review his social role.

The complexity of the problem is evident in the purposes of rhetoric as employed by the American parties. Its primary function is to reactivate loyalties by reaffirming faith in familiar symbols — individuals, programs, or cultural biases. For the Democrats this meant personal liberty laws, the open sabbath, the parochial school, and the saloon; for the Republicans it meant the renewal of the issues of the Civil War, the antislavery crusade, and the “bloody shirt.” The second function of political rhetoric is to provide answers to the questions raised by the opposition. The answers need not be rational. They can be emotional responses (they work just as well), but there has to be some kind of answer.

The third function, perhaps the least important among existing parties, is conversion, because the idea is not to win from the opposition but to hold your own allies and to pick up support among those who are uncommitted. Conversion is accomplished not only by informing the voter on issue-oriented questions but also by indicating how the party’s social values matched those of the prospective convert. Conversion is exceedingly difficult even today — it is very difficult to make a Republican into a Democrat or a Democrat into a Republican — but it was even harder then for the simple reason that today there are many media and then there were few. Voters rarely exposed themselves to the media of the opposition. The only press, after all, was partisan or parochial, and there was damn little chance for any Catholic to pick up a Methodist “trade journal.” I think you can ponder this one very quickly. The church magazines did not circulate across party lines, and yet this was a critical basis of social cohesion. If conversion was almost impossible, the Populists knew that their propaganda must activate yet not threaten farmers. If a farmer saw no disagreement between his economic and political position, you could not budge him.

In other words, if he felt economically secure, and he was not threatened by the environment, he stayed where he was. If he detected an incongruity between his economic position and his political position, and he saw no conflict between a new political position and the social bases of his politics — that is, his religion or his ethnicity — then he was a potential candidate for change. He might cast at least a protest vote. If a farmer detected a discrepancy but no conflict in his social values and those of the opposition party, then you might move him over into your ranks. Successful rhetoric and social criticism, then, cloaked congruent symbols and tempted the farmer to reassess his position. The easiest recruit was the man who felt that his political role was dysfunctional at a time when he experienced intense frustration. To put it another way, when his bank account was...
empty, and he could not get a hearing in town with the local political leaders, and he felt alienated from the group around him which may have been prosperous and to which he had once adhered. He was a free floater. And, if you did not threaten his religion or ethnicity, he was the man you could latch onto.

THE POPULISTS understood the inseparability of style and social criticism. When a farmer, unused to public attention, uttered innocent expressions of anguish about his economic affairs, the medium itself was the message — alienation and role dysfunction were symbolized by the usually inarticulate man who rose up one day and said, “I am poor, and something has to be done.” The Populist novels displayed the same simplicity. Their lurid tales and inane dialogues exaggerated in the same way that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* exaggerated, or *Ramona* exaggerated, or the *Ku Klux Klan* novels of the South exaggerated. Their emotional appeals, freighted with negative cultural references, unrealistically inflated heroes and bogeymen and identified cultural conflicts as deeper than they actually were. Populism’s successful politicians tried not to make this kind of mistake. They sought to take advantage of these things and yet withhold the party from identification with the negative symbols.

Although the lifetime of Populism was short, the rhetoric of its social criticism changed. Populism metamorphosed from a body of semiorganized criticism into a political platform. To do this, it required surrogate symbols for personal liberty and for race. As the movement became a party, its leaders sought to turn ethnicity into acceptable hyphenatism (except for Orientals), religious identity into cultural pluralism, and programs for sumptuary legislation into mechanisms to control immoral economic behavior. But since the creation of Populism was more a function of human experience than a plan, it should be seen as an integrating force in a society disrupted by economic problems. Yet, because the process was unique and the social bases of the older parties — the saloon, the sabbath, the school, and race — were strong, the coalition that made up Populism was highly improbable. These were not normal bedfellows; these were people of disparate bases in their normal lives.

Accommodation, however, was implicit in Populist assumptions. The Populists placed so much emphasis on the fact that man could control his own destiny, and that human problems yielded to common sense solutions, that they shunned moral rigidity. In fact, their faith in man, which many scholars feel is the cardinal feature of the Populist creed, necessitated that they be accommodationist in their methods. For unlike the Mugwumps who took pride in being an oppressed minority — for the few were the best — the Populists believed they were a victimized majority. They read literally and believed portions of the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, and they concluded the good sense of political equality, initiative, referendum, and recall, as well as legislative rather than commission control of corporate power. The many may not lay claim to being the best, but they can insist on being equal and entitled to power. And this was the latent loyalty the Populists sought to activate. Therefore, regardless of the intensity of the political campaigns of the era, the Populists never repudiated the structure or the symbols related to America’s secular political heritage. It became the surrogate for ethnicity, for race, and other social bases of politics.

It is well worth remembering that Populism’s first appeals rang with the rhetoric of the antislavery crusade. The Populists welcomed the Black voter, and this horrified the Mugwumps. Like most Americans the Mugwumps favored white control — regardless of party — and they doubtless shared the fears of many southerners that competition for the Black vote in the South would upset white hegemony. Ironically, even the Populists came to accept this view, but only after the Democrats in the South, in state after state, had manipulated the Black vote to remain in power.

The depression, which began for agriculture in the 1880s, infected the whole economy in the 1890s. Unemployment, labor unrest, and business failures led to the sharpest kind of economic cross pressure on the major political parties. The Populists redoubled their appeals — both urban and rural — seeking partisans whose loyalties had been shaken. Their program — which attacked laissez faire, urged government ownership of natural monopolies, heavier taxation of the rich, an expanded currency, the eight-hour day for the industrial workers, as well as such familiar reforms as initiative, referendum, and recall — was intended to attract support among workers and small businessmen as well as among farmers. And slowly on, it won adherents.

But as it grew, the Populist coalition became incredibly complex. The structural dilemma created within the party by various power-aspiring groups — each with its own social bases for existence — was never resolved by the Populists. Populist leaders responded to it by attempting to eliminate the divisive questions, just as the major parties had tried to eliminate divisive questions, and they did so by the style and treatment of issues that they raised to national prominence. For example, the Populists attacked the American Protective Association as much because it opposed their program as because it raised to national attention the issue of Roman Catholic immigration and Roman Catholic power. This was a direct threat to Populism at a time when the party was seeking to play down ethnicity and religion and focus attention on economic issues. Populist leaders knew that many Catholic workingmen were turning away from the
Democratic party rather than turning toward Populism, and since Populists sought to substitute economic class and other social factors to hold and win support among them, the APA was anathema. Moreover, when Catholics became Populists, the coalition demanded a negative response to anyone who raised ethnicity as an issue in American politics.

**POPULIST SOCIAL CRITICISM** was not a deviant behavioral force in American society. The crisis of the 1890s did not strike an integrated society that could rally and enhance its sense of solidarity through altruism. American society lacked solidarity, and it also lacked altruism in the 1890s. The fault lines were already present; they were shown more clearly as economic pressure increased. The impact of the depression, with its attendant political behavior, was a fact for everyone in American society to face. Indeed, the emergence of the Populist party implied the existence in the American social system of an automatic control mechanism to lessen instability created by cross pressures such as depression, and without these institutional responses there might in fact have been even greater social and personal disorientation and disorganization. It is a mistake to confuse social criticism within our system as deviancy. In a democratic society, certainly in the western cultural tradition, social criticism is bound up with the basic continuity of the democratic way of life.

What misled some contemporaries — people, incidentally, who wanted to be misled — and some scholars today into emphasizing the deviant nature of Populism was the large role played by violence in Populist rhetoric. But there has been a gross misreading of this evidence. The Populist novelists predicted violence only if efforts at reform failed; they did not advocate violence as a means of achieving social change. Moreover, many Populist editors disapproved of the boiler plate provided to them by their national press association. And the boiler plate was the “hot stuff” in Populist literature. The editors objected to the stridency of this material produced by hack writers with no local constituency or responsibility. More important still, when Populists lost elections as a result of fraud, and they did so in Alabama, or they were denied control of government, as they were in Kansas, they never took to the streets. There were no Populist riots, in the sense that we have experienced riots within our time. And it is a gross distortion to believe that Coxey’s Army was a Populist manifestation in the sense that the March on Washington by militant American Blacks was an outcry of Black militancy. The Populists retained their patience. Unlike the abolitionists in the pre-Civil War era, the Populists did not break the laws. Ignatius Donnelly was no William Lloyd Garrison, and he was no Theodore Parker. He was not a man for the streets. The Populists’ continuing quest

for a broader political base, and the very nature of their assumptions, precluded that kind of militancy. When they talked about violence, they intended to denounce it.

Viewed in perspective, then, Populism and its critics exist in a strange tension. In a nation of urban boosters with a highly educated urban elite that is concerned with problems arising from the complexities of the modern city, little wonder that Populism’s social criticism has found few sympathetic interpreters. The critics have combed Populist rhetoric for negative cultural symbols; they have criticized the party for its inability to win (and, after all, in a booster’s society winning is itself a virtue); and they have described it as simplistic or worse because it could not offer solutions to problems that baffled everyone else at the same time. In fact, the term “populism” has achieved a novel pejorative status. One senses that the unease of the 1890s persists. Perhaps there is a Mugwump streak among contemporary American intellectuals. With few exceptions, their moral rigidity has led them into positions that have put them at odds with the party in power regardless of what party is in power. It does not tend to build faith in a past political party that emphasizes the popular vote and accommodation, if these mechanisms have denied the validity of the social bases for granting power to intellectuals.

Only an appreciation of the impact of the depression of the 1880s and the 1890s can really explain the nature of Populist social criticism. It was a crisis not only of dysfunctional arrangements but also of human tragedy. The political mechanism assumed unusual importance. Party became a vehicle by which people sought to preserve themselves and their values. The plastic nature of Populism provided people of many persuasions additional options and a degree of latitude that the rigid two-party, or an ideologically oriented multiparty, system would not allow. Undoubtedly, more drastic social and personal disorganization would have occurred without Populism. The people who felt the crisis most sharply, and who sought an explanation for it, found an outlet in Populist social criticism.

Populism’s style and solutions may have been simplistic. But the Populists, in their search for a system of politics which neutralized social references and accentuated economic factors, may also, in their own contradictions, have made a genuine contribution. The Populists realized that the realistic alternatives were not a simple Mugwump dichotomy — bad men versus good, paternalism versus laissez faire. The real alternatives were between the conscious exercise of power held in trust — the use of power in conformity with the democratic rhetoric and the humane heritage of western culture — versus the abuse of power by any party or by any group. Implicitly and explicitly, Populists made this point. I think it is a point worth remembering.