

The

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LOWDOWN

“Ten men in the country could buy the world and 10 million can’t buy enough to eat.”

—WILL ROGERS

WRITTEN BY JIM HIGHTOWER

The 1890s revolt against the Robber Barons shows what can be achieved

Seeds of a movement: A 21st century Populist renewal is flourishing at America’s grassroots

IN NOVEMBER, I SPOKE to an overflow crowd gathered in Duke University’s Lilly Library for Larry Goodwyn’s unusual memorial service. Unusual? Well, it was the first memorial I’d ever been to that had to have an intermission!

That was because the “honoree” himself was such an unusual character (pugnacious populist agitator, rebellious scholar, powerful writer, demanding mentor, and passionate protagonist for social justice), so a long line of folks had tales to tell. But what struck me as most unusual was that the attendees were not merely spending three hours looking back at a life well lived, but almost gleefully looking forward.

Goodwyn was the modern-day guru of American Populism. He’d been on the front lines of both progressive academics and activism for more than six decades, blending his work as a renowned scholar of the 19th century Populist movement with his own practice of populism as a strategist and foot soldier in the civil rights, labor, and other grassroots social movements of his time. In 1976, he literally rewrote the textbooks with his path-changing work, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment In American History*. This penetrating volume thoroughly debunked the ivory tower historians of the establishment who had condescendingly dismissed the Populists of the late 1800s as nothing but a bumbling bunch of demagogic, racist rubes in southern backwaters.

Au contraire, as we Texans say. Professor Goodwyn showed that the populist revolt against the unbridled greed of the robber baron era was a highly sophisticated mass movement. It gave downtrodden millions a voice and an empowering sense of themselves as democratic citizens. Through the movement’s cooperative structure, grassroots people—who’d been isolated from each other, were mostly impoverished, and were often

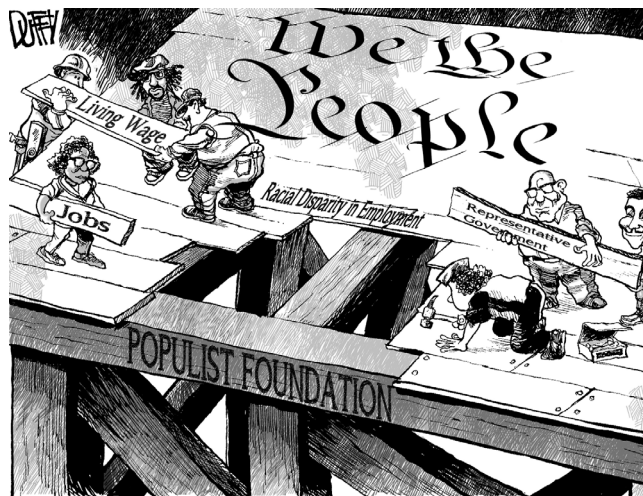
illiterate—learned how to address their own conditions and created new ways to work together to achieve their aspirations. Radically progressive, the movement included both African-Americans and urban unionists in its ranks and leadership, and it aimed for major structural changes to democratize the economic and political systems. Populism surged across the country into 43 states, from California to New York.

Historian Wesley Hogan, a former student of Larry’s, notes that *Democratic Promise* elevated the historical significance of common “farmers, steel workers, day laborers, and sharecroppers,” showing how they had “found stunning new ways to act democratically.” Goodwyn, he added, “made this history vivid and touchable. He encouraged us to dream democracy anew.”

At Larry’s memorial, optimism about the prospects of that dream was sparking across the room, prompting an un-funereal glee. The informal conversations among us *Goodwynistas* were about the encouraging signs we’re now seeing of a Populist renewal percolating up from America’s grassroots. The renewal is

as yet more a series of sustained actions than a movement. But all of those people-fired actions are in rebellion against various forms of corporate imperiousness from fracking to the imposition of a poverty-wage ethic in our rich land, and all are being joined by large numbers of people who’ve not previously been politically active nor counted as progressive. Yes, Larry Goodwyn has died, but the *democratic possibilities* that were his life’s work suddenly seem more within America’s reach today than we could have imagined ten or even five years ago.

At the close of my remembrance of Goodwyn, I usurped an advertising slogan that a local moving company was using when I first migrated to Austin, Texas, in 1976. The company was just a little outfit consisting of one truck and two burly guys whose names, as I recall, were something like Skeeter and Booger. But their slogan expressed a big, positive,



WALL STREET WARNS DEMS: AVOID POPULISM!

HERE'S A JARRING headline: "Economic Populism Is a Dead End for Democrats."

That's the title on a recent op-ed written by a couple of longtime political flacks for Wall Street and published, naturally, in the *Wall Street Journal*. When the Barons of Big Money start rolling out such scolding screeds, it's not because they really think populism is a political loser, but because they're terrified by the fact that it has already gained mass appeal. Indeed, to put a thin veneer of legitimacy on this op-ed, they had to resort to the fiction that it is a warning written to Democrats by Democrats—specifically by an inside-the-Beltway outfit calling itself Third Way.

But this group is to authentic Democratic Party principles what near beer is to stout—only not as close. Third Way is just the same old Wall Street way. While it wears a Democratic mask, it pushes for policies that are Wall Street wet dreams, including gutting and privatizing Social Security.

Why would a group claiming genuine Democratic genes be an advocate for further enriching Wall Street's elite at the expense of America's middle class and the poor? To find out, just peek behind Third Way's organizational curtain. You'll see that its funders and governing board include no one from labor, seniors, consumers, environmentalists, small farmers, students, African-Americans, Latinos, or other core Democratic constituencies. Instead, of its 29 board members, 20 are Wall Street bankers, hedge fund hucksters, or venture capital vultures.

Third Way deadends at Wall Street. Fronting for the selfish interests of its backers, it doesn't want any party championing economic populism. But the people do, and that's who Democrats should heed.

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populistic outlook: "If we can get it loose," they asserted, "we can move it."

That not only fit Larry's decades-long effort to free the true meaning of American Populism from the historical dustbin, but it's also apt for the promising emergence of a new Populist moment in our history.

Where it comes from

My father, W.F. "High" Hightower, was a populist. Only, he didn't know it. Didn't know the word, much less the history or anything about populism's rich democratic ethos.

But he knew about bankers who regularly squeezed small-business families like ours with usurious interest rates. He knew how rough it was for a local business to fight off deep-pocketed chain stores that use predatory pricing and sledgehammer advertising budgets to seize local markets. And he saw with his very own eyes that the governor and legislature in faraway Austin operated as subsidiaries of Big Oil, the utility monopolies, and the other giants that were allowed to profit by picking the pockets of the general public.

He and my mother Lillie knew one other thing, too: There was once a Democratic Party that stood up for regular folks and actively promoted the ethic of the common good. Having been raised on hard-scrabble Texas farms and come of age in the Depression, they didn't see the New Deal through ideological glasses, but simply as the help they and the rest of America needed—a path out of both depression and the Depression.

That path eventually allowed my parents to scramble into America's lower middle class. Moreover, the New Deal's outreach gave my father, who was not at all philosophical, a phrase that he used occasionally to express the gist of his political beliefs: "Everybody does better when *everybody* does better."

That is Populism. Neither right nor left, Republican or Democrat, it is not based on ideology, but on two gut-level fundamentals: **(1)** our people's historic aspiration for a society and nation of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity for all; and **(2)** the actual life experience of people who see those values routinely trampled by domineering elites.

The meaner and broader the trampling gets, the quicker a populist fever can spread, and it has erupted periodically throughout our history in organized rebellions against the repressive and exploitative forces of Big Money. Populist fights are direct confrontations over this recurring reality: **With too few people controlling too much of the money and power, they use that control to grab more for themselves at the expense of the many.**

America's natural politics

Before the Populists of the late 1800s gave this instinctive rebelliousness a name, it had long been established as a defining trait of our national character: The 1776 rebellion was not only against King George III's government but against the corporate tyranny of such British monopolists as the East India Trading Company.

The establishment certainly doesn't celebrate the populist spirit, and our educational system dutifully avoids bothering students with our vibrant, human story of constant battles, big and small, mounted by feisty "little people" against... well, against the establishment. The Keepers of the Corporate Order take special care to avoid even a suggestion that there is an important political pattern—a historic continuum—that connects Thomas Paine's radical democracy writings in the late 1700s to Shay's Rebellion in 1786, to strikes by mill women and carpenters in the early 1800's, Jefferson's 1825 warning about the rising aristocracy of banks and corporations "riding and ruling over the plundered ploughman," the launching of the women's suffrage movement at Seneca Falls in 1848, the maverick Texans who outlawed banks in their 1845 state constitution, the bloody and ultimately successful grassroots struggle for the abolition of slavery, and to the Populist movement itself, plus the myriad rebellions that followed, right into our present day.

WHAT POPULISM IS NOT: An empty word for lazy reporters to attach to any angry spasm of popular discontent. (And it's damn sure not Sarah Palin and today's clique of Koch-funded, corporate-hugging, tea party Republicans.)

WHAT IT IS: For some 238 years, it has been the chief political impulse in America's body politic—determinedly democratic, vigilantly resistant to the oppressive power of corporations and Wall Street, committed to grassroots percolate-up economics, and firmly rooted in my old Daddy's concept of "Everybodyness," recognizing that we're all in this together.

Although it was organized into a formal movement for only about 25 years, Populism has had an outsized, long-term, and ongoing impact on our culture, public policies, economic structure, and governing systems. Even though its name is rarely used and its history largely hidden, and even though neither major party will embrace it (much less *become* it), there are many more people today whose inherent political instincts are Populist, rather than conservative or liberal.

Yet the pundits and politicians frame our choices entirely in terms of that narrow con-lib ideological spectrum, ignoring the very large fact that most of us are neither, or a bit of both. Our nation's true political

DoSomething!

Info, contacts, and action:

Books:

- **Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement In America**, by Lawrence Goodwyn
- **A People's History of the United States 1492 to Present**, by Howard Zinn

Groups:

- **National People's Action:** www.npa-us.org
- **Occupy Wall Street:** www.occupywallst.org
- **Working Families Party:** www.workingfamiliesparty.org

spectrum is not right to left, but top to bottom. People can locate themselves along this vertical rich-to-poor spread, for this is not a theoretical positioning: It's based on our real-world experience with money and power. This is America's real politics. Forget the ideological screeds and partisan posturing that pass for "political debate" these days. "Left wing, chicken wing," Woody Guthrie said dismissively of such rhetorical squabbles, which produce much hollering but no real change.

Today's workaday majority can plainly see that a privileged few at the top are separating their fortunes as fast as they can from the well being of the rest of us. We've also seen that after the 2008 economic collapse both major parties rushed to wipe the fevered brows of the pampered few with our tax dollars and did little about the crash in the wages, income, wealth, and economic power of the bottom 90 percent. Five years later, Congress blithely continues to ignore the ongoing destruction of the middle class and the unconscionable rise in poverty—unless you count last year's cuts to food stamp funding and jobless benefits as "doing something."

Our system of representative government has, in a word, collapsed. Most in Congress are not even trying anymore—not listening to the people, not talking their language, not even knowing any regular folks, and obviously not representing their interests. But what we also have is a ripening political opportunity for a revitalized, 21st century populist movement.

Finding populism today

Mass movements don't just magically appear out of the fog, fully grown, structured, and mobilized. They emerge in fits and starts over many years, just as the American Revolution did, and as did the Populists' original idea of a "cooperative commonwealth." A successful people's movement has to take the long view, to learn about itself as it builds, nurture the culture of its people, take chances, create fun for all involved, adapt to failures and successes, stay steadfast to its big principles, have a stoic tenacity—and organize, organize, organize. A little serendipity helps, too, so grab it when you can.

In 2011, to the astonishment of nearly everyone, a serendipitous moment for the populist cause rumbled across our land, though later it was widely (and wrongly) dismissed as a failure. That September, hundreds of young people, loosely aligned with an upstart group called Occupy Wall Street, took over Zuccotti Park in New York City and audaciously camped out on the front stoop of the elite banksters who'd crashed our economy. Occupy's depiction of the 1-percent vs. the 99-percent struck a chord with the unemployed, underemployed, and the knocked-down middle class. Occupy encampments quickly sprang up in some 200 cities and towns from coast to coast.

The uprising was soon ridiculed (even by many progressive groups) as naïve, undisciplined, and "not serious." Who's in charge? Where's their strategic plan? Why don't they have position papers? All this carping about Occupy failing to produce the usual trappings of a Washington-focused interest group missed two essential points the young people were making: **(1)** such trappings are not producing any change, and **(2)** we're not an interest group, we're a *rebellion*.

Rebellion has to come first. As it builds, structure and process will follow in due time. The great *strength* of Occupy is that it was a genuine, non-institutional, social, non-wonkish, morally compelling, and spontaneous stand against the culture of inequality that the moneyed powers are imposing. It touched people in far deeper ways than issue politics will ever do. And the great *achievement* of Occupy is that it prompted a cultural shift that turned Wall Street's pampered barons into social pariahs and put the burning issue of inequality directly at the center of our nation's political debate. (You could ask Mitt Romney about that. The clueless personification of Wall Street's 1-percent never knew what hit him in the next year's election.)

To find populism flowering today, take a road trip across any stretch of America, or take a gander around your own community. Just in the past few months, the *Lowdown* has highlighted a splendid array of ordinary folks rebelling against the bosses, bankers, big shots, and bastards who dare subjugate us to their greed, including:

KEEPING US SAFE . . . FROM PARODY

IT'S A SCARY world out there.

That's why we must be grateful to the National Security Agency and our Department of Homeland Security.

They're constantly on watch, poised to spring to our defense. Some home-grown cynics say the billions a year we spend on these two agencies of eternal vigilance is wasted. Oh yeah? Well, let me rub the noses of those cynics in a dangerous mess right in our own midst.

I speak of *LibertyManiacs.com*, a diabolical website run by a fiend named Dan McCall. McCall is an American, but he has apparently been recruited to the dark side, for he's issuing propaganda that hurts the efforts of our anti-terror agency heroes. Or at least it hurts their feelings.

Specifically, Dan's been selling t-shirts, coffee cups, and other paraphernalia with slogans that mock the two spook agencies. One calls DHS the "Department of Homeland Stupidity." Another says: "NSA: The Only Part of Government That Actually Listens." And one even alters the NSA's logo to read: "Peeping While You're Sleeping."

Top spooks at NSA and DHS were outraged, and both agencies took legal action to try stopping McCall from... well, from making fun of them.

Technically, though, that's not against the law (not yet), so the agencies had to go after him for "mutilation... or impersonation of government seals."

McCall's politics are not at all leftie, but are, in fact, way out in right field. But in this case, who cares? When this huge, secretive, and powerful agencies try to outlaw parody, that's neither left nor right—it's straight-up stupid.



WRITER: Jim Hightower

RESEARCH: Laura Ehrlich COPY WIZ: Cody Garrett

DESIGN: Debra Barron ILLUSTRATOR: Brian Duffy

CIRCULATION: Acme Publishing Services

INTERWEB EMISSARY: Deanna Zandt

COORABELL CONSIGLIERE: Phillip Frazer

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**A 21ST CENTURY POPULIST
 RENEWAL IS PERCOLATING UP
 FROM AMERICA'S GRASSROOTS**

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 Keeping us safe...
 from parody..... 3

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PERIODICALS



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■ **Mad-as-hellers in dozens of states**, often in isolated rural areas, now form an increasingly effective guerilla network to combat the massive invasion by global oil and gas giants to frack our land. Last November, three Colorado cities beat back Big Oil's money and the lies of some of their own political officials in a vote to ban fracking in their areas. New York State and more than 100 other cities have imposed moratoria or bans on this corporate plundering.

■ **Putting a specific face on Occupy's theme** of gross economic inequality, a nationwide revolt of exploited fast food workers erupted last summer, gaining the high ground against McDonald's and other poverty-wage profiteers. While Washington sticks to the miserly federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, grassroots campaigns are elevating state and local minimums to \$10 an hour and above. Voters in Seattle, Washington raised theirs to \$15 last November.

■ **Two huge corporate/government cabals**—the sovereignty-sucking Trans-Pacific Partnership (*Lowdown*, August 2013) and the NSA's secret, Orwellian program of spying on every American (*Lowdown*, October 2013)—are coming unraveled, thanks to public outrage that has united a left-right coalition in Congress. Meanwhile, the crucial populist struggle to salvage our democracy from the Supreme Court's scurrilous *Citizens United* edict (a fight deemed unwinnable only a couple of years ago), quietly continues to gain ground with 16 states and over 200 local jurisdictions passing proposals in support of a constitutional repeal of the Court's ruling.

There's so much more underway: Placing a Robin Hood tax on Wall Street speculators. A surge in co-ops as a democratic alternative to corporate control. Getting Monsanto's genetically altered organisms out of our food supply. A vibrant and positive campaign by immigrants themselves for immigrant rights. Battling giants such as Disney World and Walmart to win paid sick leave days for low-wage workers. Freeing college students from Wall Street's loan sharks. All of these and so many more are the sprouting seeds of a widespread, flourishing Populist movement.

The national conversation is changing as the austerity-at-all-costs mantra of the Koch-heads in Congress has been debunked and as the "makers vs. takers" construct has been exposed for what it is: the self-aggrandizing balderdash of puffed-up plutocrats. To their astonishment, the Koch boys themselves, along with their malevolent state legislative sidekick, ALEC, have been reduced to four-letter epithets.

Instead, voices of egalitarianism and social justice are rising.

■ **Since last April**, for example, a broad coalition of hardy North Carolinians has been braving arrest as part of their continuing series of "Moral Monday" protests against the GOP legislature's

ceaseless attacks on voters, labor, women, students, the poor, and the unemployed.

■ **Even in our corporatized Congress**, a growing Progressive Caucus, directly connected to grassroots activists groups, is pushing bold, populist solutions and directly confronting the corporate interests. Such lawmakers as Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, for example, are reversing the conventional Washington discussion on "how much to cut" people's programs and calling for expansions of Social Security and an extension of Medicare to all Americans.

■ **The pulpit has steadily been enlarging** its concerns beyond fire-and-brimstone broadsides that demonize LGBT and ostracize all who would permit a woman's right to choose. Major evangelical super churches now embrace environmentalism (and confront human-induced climate change) and give priority to meeting the needs of the poor and our declining middle class. In a happy surprise, the globe has been given a forceful new moral voice against the "idolatry of money" and the "new tyranny" of unfettered capitalism: Pope Francis.

The challenge of 2014

Musical poet Leonard Cohen sings a deep, rhythmic anthem titled "Democracy Is Coming to the USA." Democracy is coming, but it will not arrive as a mystical, inevitable force but as the result of hard pulling by good people who are **(1)** committed over the long haul to America's democratic ideals, **(2)** willing to confront today's powerful plutocracy head on, and **(3)** ready to do the serious groundwork of organizing a viable Populist movement.

If you're looking for an example of this in politics, check out the underreported successes of the Working Families Party. The WFP is a savvy and aggressive democratic organization whose members, organizers, and voters were the populist force behind Bill de Blasio's landslide victory in November's New York City mayor's race. Running on a boldly progressive platform focused on the issues of widening inequality and the hollowing out of the middle class, de Blasio and WFP won a stunning 73 percent of the vote. Working Families candidates also doubled the party's membership on the City council and won three other citywide positions.

While the rejection of business-as-usual politics in this huge city seemed to "come out of nowhere," it was the fruit of more than a decade of recruiting, training, developing, and steadily moving up top-quality candidates who champion populist ideals and ideas.

The elements of a full-fledged Populist movement are out there, and they are moving. As we enter a new year, the moment is ripe to bond them into something larger.