

## The Political Economy of "Agrarian Revolt" on the Great Plains, 1862-1900

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### Introduction

Among the standard chapters in American history texts are "The Granger Revolt" and "The Populist Revolt" (Taylor 1953:140,281; Morrison et al. 1969:143,169). These titles produce images of infuriated farmers grabbing pitchforks and rifles to join in a unified and homogeneous mob to lynch the banker and railroad tycoon. This paper will examine what has been termed an "agrarian revolt" as it occurred in Nebraska and the Dakota Territory from the Homestead Act of 1862 to the decline of the Populist movement in 1900. The Frederick Jackson Turner image of a unified, agrarian-wide farmers' movement (see Nash 1991) will be contrasted with the actual composition of the Plains population during this period, in terms of economic class, gender and ethnicity. An examination will then be made of the segment of this Plains population that actually supported and controlled the structures that became the Granger Movement and the Populist Party, and why predominantly peaceful, political campaigns have been characterized as "agrarian revolt." I. Background of the Granger and Populist Movements From the end of the Civil War to 1890, the Great Plains experienced a rapid and massive demographic transformation (Simons 1902:39). Through the Homestead Act of 1862, the U.S. Government offered title to 160 acres of public land to any eligible individuals who filed a claim, made improvements and lived on the settlement for five continuous years. U.S. war veterans were given script entitling them to 160 acres of public land, which could be used or sold on the market (O'Neill 1875:17-18; Johnson 1880:105; Gates 1973:243). Railroad companies had been given millions of acres of right-of-way land grants by the U.S. Government to encourage trans-continental transportation development. The railroad companies in turn encouraged settlers to relocate to the Plains, to purchase these lands at market price and to provide the railroads with freight and passenger customers (O'Neill 1875:93; Gates 1973:243-44; Limerick 1987:125). Millions of additional acres of Indian land became available for settlers, initially through treaty agreements and later through "surplus" lands retained by the U.S. government after land allotments to individual Indians were made under the Dawes Act of 1887 (Johnson 1880:54-59; Johnston 1948:32; Jones 1988:125-26). In response to a media campaign of plenty of land and opportunity for hard work by the U.S., state governments, railroads and real estate brokers, thousands of families headed west. Books, pamphlets and newspapers extolled the virtues of life on the Plains, with its great climate, easily tilled soil, and harmonious community life (Simons 1902:32; Limerick 1987:125; see O'Neill 1875; Johnson 1880; Hervey 1903). Because the Union Pacific and other lines extended across the Plains by the 1870s, relocation did not require endless days in covered wagons, as the migrations to Oregon and California had in the 1830s and 40s; the price of train fare was all that was needed (O'Neill 1875:22; Johnson 1880:168; Simons 1902:40; Paine 1935:26; Taylor 1953:140; Arends 1989:37). The prospects of free or inexpensive land encouraged families who had lost their farms or were tenants without prospects for land

ownership in the middle western states of Illinois, Ohio and Indiana to move further west with little or no accumulated capital (Paine 1935:19; Gates 1973:286-87,320). The realities awaiting these settlers were often at odds with the glowing images of frontier propaganda. The land open to Homestead claims was generally the least attractive, farthest from transportation routes, and by the 1880s beyond the range of adequate rainfall for cultivation (Shannon 1957:9; Douglas 1969:59-61; Gates 1973:v; Limerick 1987:61). The best lands had been granted to railroads or purchased in huge blocks of up to 200,000 acres by bonanza farm enterprises and land speculators demanding high prices per acre for resale (Simons 1902:31-32; Robinson 1905:172; Gates 1973:240,241,321; Diller 1941:43-44,115). In some instances, settlers moved from land in the central states to land in the Plains that was owned by the same absentee landlord (Simons 1902:33; Gates 1973:273-74). The land, though treeless, still required close to \$1500 capital and tremendous labor before it could be cultivated (Gates 1973:311-12; Limerick 1987:125). The climate, far from terrific, was a nightmarish cycle of flood, blizzard, drought, heat wave, hail and insect infestation (Robinson 1905:160; Paine 1935:21,23,24; Handlin 1965:179; Morrison et al. 1969:170; Limerick 1987:126; Arends 1989:54-55). Close to two-thirds of those who attempted to Homestead gave up and returned east in the 1890s (Hervey 1903:24; Robinson 1905:173; Paine 1935:19; Taylor 1953:285; Shannon 1957:45). The relationship between economic factors and the agrarian protests of 1862-1900 have been well documented. New technology and scientific approaches to agriculture made it possible to produce greater yields per acre (Douglas 1969:94; Carstensen 1974:1). The amount of land committed to cultivation expanded nation wide from 163 million acres in 1865 to 415 million in 1900 (Carstensen 1974:2), and in Nebraska, from 118,789 acres in 1860 to 647,031 acres by only 1870 (Hervey 1903:25). Production increased dramatically after 1860. This impressive agricultural yield helped U.S. national production and international balance of trade, with agricultural products constituting 75% of U.S. exports in the 1870s (Taylor 1953:9; Douglas 1969:57). By 1880, food from American farmers was so inexpensive and abundant that the English working class could afford white bread and beef (Carstensen 1974:8). The result of this massive increase in production for farmers was constant competition among themselves to adjust to and accommodate new technology and new business relations (Schmidt & Ross 1925:457; Taylor 1953:91; Carstensen 1974:12). Contrary to the notion of pioneers as subsistence farmers, Plains farms were fully commercial agricultural production enterprises from the beginning of white settlement (Simons 1902:41; Klepper 1978:80; contra Taylor 1953:9). Larger scale operations pushed smaller farms out of the market as increasing specialization in single commodity crop production made each producer more vulnerable to commodity price swings (Simons 1902:41,73; Klepper 1978:80). Even when one area of the Plains had low production due to drought, downward pressure on prices continued as other areas in the region or other regions had bumper crops. Prices for corn and wheat steadily declined, to the point where farmers burned grain to heat their homes. Against this background, the Patrons of Husbandry or the Grange began to form chapters in communities on the Plains. The Grange was first established in 1867 in Washington, D.C. by Oliver Kelley, a former employee of the Department of Agriculture (Shannon 1957:55; Robinson 1966:3; Carstensen 1974:17). Concerned by the difficult conditions and isolation of the farm families he encountered in his work, Kelley created the Grange as a secret, non-political organization to foster education, economic planning,

religious morals, cooperation and social gathering among farm families (Taylor 1953:3,160; Shannon 1957:55; Handlin 1965:179; Robinson 1966:45; Klepper 1978:15). Despite the explicit exclusion of political activities from its meetings, the Grange halls provided a locus for farmers to start organizing politically to change the economic conditions identified with their struggles (Taylor 1953:7-8,125; Shannon 1957:55; Lamar 1956:146). In 1873, Congress abolished the silver dollar as part of a post-war deflationary policy (Taylor 1953:142). This left farmers with lower crop prices, and with fixed charges, mortgage debts and taxes all more burdensome as the value of money increased (Taylor 1953:91-92; Gates 1973:253; Limerick 1987:127). Scarce money led to tight credit and high interest rates. Farm mortgages renewed at interest rates from 15 to 20% (Schmidt & Ross 1925:449-50; Shannon 1957:50). This "Crime of 1873" led to a groundswell of Grange membership and the creation of Reform, Independent, Anti-Monopoly and Greenback local parties by Grange members seeking salvation from bankruptcy (Shannon 1957:55). Two major issues of the National Grange Declaration of Purpose in 1874 were opposition to monopolies and the reduction of middlemen (Simons 1902:141-42; Taylor 1953:186). First, railroad monopolies were gouging western farmers in crop freight rates. Transport costs west of Chicago were six times higher than to the east, exceeding 50% of grain prices (Hicks 1949:151; Taylor 1953:90,97; Shannon 1957:52). Therefore, the government should regulate monopolies like the railroad to insure affordable freight (Taylor 1953:97; Carstensen 1974:17). Second, cooperation among farmers was encouraged to reduce the number of non-producing middlemen that made money from farmers' purchases of inputs and sales of crops, like commodity exchange agents, grain elevators, meat packers and transporters (Shannon 1957:50,52; Carstensen 1974:8-9,14,47). The Grange movement reached its peak in 1875. Grange chapters organized buying cooperatives and even cooperative farm implement manufacturing ventures (Taylor 1953:155-58; Carstensen 1974:14). Some state rate regulation statutes or "Grange laws" were passed and upheld as Constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1877 (Robinson 1966:30-31). Many cooperative ventures, particularly in manufacturing, were damaged by price wars with the large competitors, however (Shannon 1957:55-57). By 1878, temporary improvements in farm prices and institutional resistance to explicit political organization across occupational lines contributed to a gradual return of most Grange members to the Democratic or Republican parties (Shannon 1957:57; Klepper 1978:60). A cycle of drought years in the early 1880s and the rapid growth in agricultural production lead to another severe economic downturn for Plains agriculture (Shannon 1957:54,63; Klepper 1978:64). This time, the National Farmers' Alliance, formed by Milton George in 1880, stressed political action as the way to achieve the economic goals of farmers (Hicks 1949:151; Taylor 1953:191,216; Shannon 1957:63-64; Klepper 1978:15). In addition to opposing monopolies, the Alliance movement supported barring foreigners from land ownership, increasing the per capita money supply, instituting a graduated income tax and encouraging government ownership of railroads and warehouses (Morton 1895:198-99; Taylor 1953:93,226; Shannon 1957:50,64). Gradually, Alliance organizations across the nation began to meet, as well as Knights of Labor from urban working class communities (Simons 1902:151; Shannon 1957:67). Following a convention in 1891, the National Populist or People's Party was formed from Alliance movements. In 1892, the peak of Populist support, five senators and ten representatives to the U.S. Congress were elected, along with 50 state

officials and 1500 state legislators (Simons 1902:143; Paine 1935:23; Shannon 1957:71-72; Klepper 1978:65). By 1896, Populist Party leaders were persuaded to join forces with the Democratic Party behind William Jennings Bryan (Taylor 1953:93,305; Douglas 1969:98; Klepper 1978:65). The bulk of agrarian issues were muted and the free-silver plank dominated the political campaign (Simons 1902:144; Shannon 1957:72). Many Populists felt that the Democratic idea of fusion was "that we play Jonah and they play whale" (Douglas 1969:99). Alliances with urban labor and miners were dissolved over conflicts in agenda and interests (Woodward 1959:167; Douglas 1969:86,99). By 1900, with a return of prosperity and an easing of the money supply, the agrarian movement gradually returned to the entrenching two-party political system (Simons 1902:143; Handlin 1965:178; Douglas 1969:87,94; Carstensen 1974:141).

II. Whose Voices Were Heard? This description of the Grange and Populist Party "revolts" is reproduced again and again in history books, sociological and economic analyses, and political science reviews of the American West. What is left out becomes as interesting as what is discussed in portraying and analyzing these movements as "agrarian revolt". Most fundamentally, presenting all "farmers" as uniform with identical interests obscures any sense of local conflict or dissention over legitimate agrarian grievances (Douglas 1969:57-58; Gates 1973:323; Limerick 1987:129). Generalizations about "farmers" are difficult to make (Carstensen 1974:6). To determine possible divergences in agrarian interests, the perspective on the Plains experience by economic class, gender and ethnicity will be considered.

A. Economic Class Far from being of one mold, the economic relations of the Great Plains were complex from the beginning of white settlement. In terms of land tenure alone, there were railroad monopolies, large absentee landlords, large land speculators, bonanza farm owners employing hundreds of seasonal workers, moderate size land owners, small land speculators, small land owners or claim stakers, tenant farmers, and landless farm laborers (Gates 1973:323-24; Limerick 1987:129). Among those physically engaged in farming, a continuum ran from a "subsistence" class of farmers without enough capital to produce a surplus to a moderately affluent class of successful commercial farmers with access to capital and all the new technological and scientific means of farming (Simons 1902:21; Douglas 1969:57). While the most common image of the Plains farmer is the small claim staker engaged in independent family farming, this was not the largest numerical category of the population from 1862 to 1900 (Taylor 1898:40; Diller 1941:43). Farm hands or agrarian wage laborers are the least visible segment of the Plains population in this period (Gates 1973:305; Limerick 1987:97). The Homestead Act contained no provisions to help laborers get to available farm land or to obtain capital to begin cultivation (Shannon 1957:45). In 1870, thirty-two percent of farm laborers owned no land or implements, exceeding the percentage of land owners engaged in farming (McCabe 1973:284; Shannon 1957:10; Gates 1973:304-05). Farms of 160 acres were employing two hired hands in the 1870s (Gates 1973:242,313). While the "agrarian revolt" complained of low crop prices and compared their profits to urban labor wages, the low wages paid to farm hands never entered the political debate. Yet, hard times hit the farm hands first, with no job security, seasonal demand and limited alternative work (Simons 1902:107-110; Hervey 1903:84; Limerick 1987:97). Tenant farmers were not just a memory from the crowded fields of the east. By 1880, there was a swift rise of tenancy relations on the Plains. Despite pamphlet promises of penniless pioneers becoming comfortable farm

owners, new farmers needed capital to get started, or they became trapped in the old landlord relations of the east (Johnson 1880:101,185; Gates 1973:300,311-12; Limerick 1987:125). Technological advances made a greater differential between farmers with the capital to use new forces of production and those without it (Simons 1902:83-92,147-48; Douglas 1969:57). Large absentee landowners often induced tenants to occupy unimproved land in exchange for the labor needed to make the land cultivatable, and then began charging a share of the crop produced once the land was improved (Gates 1973:240,264-65). All the increases in land value created by tenant labor were vested in the landowners (Taylor 1898:58; Simons 1902:37). Among the notorious examples of large landlords was William Scully, an English landowner with massive U.S. holdings who left Ireland to avoid being murdered by his disgruntled tenants there (Taylor 1898:58; Gates 1973:267). These absentee landlords were credited with practices like "rack-renting," extracting assurances from all businesses that no advances would be made on crops until the land rent was paid first, and making tenants pay for all improvements without offsets to rent which in turn made rents increase (Taylor 1898:58-59,67; Gates 1973:273,277-79,282; see Hobsbawm & Rude 1975:32). In areas with a large percentage of tenants, some grievance meetings and rent strikes were organized, but stiff competition for good land generally meant that dissatisfied tenants had to move on (Gates 1973:279,282,284). Tenant farmer interests ran directly counter to owner-occupied farms over the issue of land tax. Because taxes were imposed on the land owners and rent was generally a fixed percentage of crop yield, tenant farmers actively lobbied for heavy local government expenditures on roads, railroad bonds for local stations, good schools and other public works (Taylor 1953:90; Shannon 1957:52; Gates 1973:240,279). The tax bill for these comforts were born by the large faceless landlord, not the local tenants. Only the most "ruthless" landlords began imposing land taxes directly on tenants (Gates 1973:280). Local land owners, on the other hand, were directly affected by increases in land tax, and favored a graduated income tax to offset the costs of bringing infrastructure to the West, which became part of the Populist platform (Taylor 1953:226; Shannon 1957:64). Tenants also tended to ignore weeding, crop rotation, and other land management techniques, which hurt both the direct land owner and neighboring land owners (Gates 1973:280-81). Furthermore, despite the large number of tenant farmers and landless laborers, land redistribution or limitations on land holdings for citizens were never part of the agenda of "agrarian revolt," nor were programs to make initial capital available to landless farmers (Gates 1973:324). In fact, land speculation was not condemned by the middle and small land owners, because they too were engaged in speculation (Douglas 1969:60; Gates 1973:312-13). A large percentage of the men filing homestead claims had no intention of making them permanent settlements, but rather were interested in obtaining free title to land for later sale at market price (Douglas 1969:60-61; Limerick 1987:133). Resentment was expressed only against those larger capitalists who were able to buy more land earlier and thereby reap more of the profits from increasing land values (Limerick 1987:63,67). The Populist move to exclude foreigners from land ownership was intended by small and mid-size farmers to eliminate part of the competition in land speculation, and only coincidentally to protect tenant farmers from European-style landlordism (Gates 1973:294,324; Limerick 1987:67,130). Another group antagonistic to the farmers of the "agrarian revolt" was cattlemen. Far from a community of harmony, many homesteaders and small land owners were greeted

to the Plains with death threats from large cattlemen intent on keeping the range open for free grazing (Paine 1935:32,38-39). Every fence, every sod house, every acre of corn was an obstruction to the cattle drives from Texas to the railroads (Schmidt & Ross 1925:394,396). Cattle were deliberately driven through claimed homestead sites, destroying crops and damaging buildings, in an effort to discourage permanent settlers (Paine 1935:39,142). Violence and murder were committed on both sides, sometimes resulting in arrest but often simply escalating the conflict (Paine 1935:41,59-60). Cattlemen also opposed Indian land allotment and sale of "surplus" to settlers, because cattle interests had secured grazing rights on Indian lands from the U.S. Government at nominal prices, or simply used Indian lands without payment (Schmidt & Ross 1925:396,400; Johnston 1948:18-19,79; Gates 1973:314). With the invention of barbed wire in 1874, cattlemen met their match and shifted toward large permanent ranching operations in the semi-arid regions of north western Nebraska and Wyoming (Schmidt & Ross 1925:392,395,397; Paine 1935:40; Gates 1973:314).

B. Gender While farm families imply the presence of women, the Frederick Jackson Turner style of frontier analysis ignored women (Limerick 1987:49; Nash 1991). The experience of "pioneer women" was neither generic among women nor comparable to that of men (Limerick 1987:49-50). The hardships of pioneer women are the best known, giving birth unattended, watching children sicken or die without access to or money for a doctor (Paine 1935:40; Raaen 1950:17,35). For tenant farmers, or those on the margin of mortgaged land ownership, women's labor was unrelenting, turning every scrap of food and fabric into another month of survival (Limerick 1987:48,53; Arends 1989:53). The small farmer who is given nominal ownership of a farm just large enough to enable him to live with the aid of the toil of his wife and children can, by virtue of that toil, by virtue of the fact that his babes and their mother can be driven to a point to which the healthy hired man will never submit, compete in the markets of the world with the owner of the great bonanza farm. (Simons 1902:123-24). In terms of economic opportunity, women's options were curtailed. Married women were barred from filing homestead claims (Hervey 1903:92). The "spinster and widow" provisions allowed single women to file, and in fact a number of women did undertake their own farming operations (Limerick 1987:53; Bureau of Census 1907:123-28). In some instances, couples even divorced so that each could file a homestead claim, although divorce was not legal in South Dakota (Taylor 1898:114-15; Robinson 1905:203). While characterized as fraud by government officials, a son filing an adjoining claim was simply the American way. Women also took the form of wage-laborers. Over half of the school teachers were single women (Johnson 1880:331,378,429; Paine 1935:50). Young single women were hired by farm owners to prepare meals and do laundry for the farm family and male farm hands (O'Neill 1875:20). Often these women were recent immigrants, treated as stupid and exploitable because English was their second language. [I]ntelligent American girls, if their services are not needed at home, and they are obliged wholly or partially to earn their own living, become teachers or seek employment in the cities and villages, while the only household 'help' that can be obtained is of the raw Irish or German variety, which requires generations in which to be educated, and which when educated ceases to be obtainable. (McCabe 1873:452). In every form of wage labor, including teaching, women earned about one-third less than their male counterparts (Johnson 1880:228,372,409,477; O'Neill 1875:20). The option of prostitution or the romanticized dance hall girl was no more lucrative

(Limerick 1987:49-50). Women became positioned in oppositional camps of temperance versus sin when farm wives found their husbands spending the limited cash of the family on alcohol at saloons (Raaen 1950:52; Limerick 1987:50). The Temperance Movement became a visible outlet for the political expression of otherwise disenfranchised women (Douglas 1969:104). The place of women in the agrarian movement was ambiguous at best. Women were encouraged to join the Grange, and paid a reduced membership fee in recognition of the limited cash they controlled (McCabe 1973:452; Shannon 1957:55; Robinson 1966:47). Women's needs were most often defined as socializing and religious communion (McCabe 1873:451-52). The idea that they should want or need to vote in local and national political elections was dismissed out of hand, however (McCabe 1873:456). Later, in the early days of the Populist movement, women's suffrage was included as a party plank, but was immediately dropped once the party fused with the Democrats for the 1896 campaign (Taylor 1953:189; Douglas 1969:104).

C. Ethnicity

Just as the Plains was not inhabited by one economic class, residents possessed an equally diverse array of cultural and national backgrounds. The first residents of the Plains were American Indians, predominantly Pawnee, Lakota and Omaha. In this time period, "native Americans" were not Indians but white, primarily Anglo-Saxons born in the U.S. of parents that were born in the U.S. (Taylor 1898:59; Bureau of Census 1907:9; Gates 1973:253) Foreign immigrants and the children of foreign immigrants were consciously set apart in the first Plains settlements (Robinson 1905:222; Johnson 1880:163-68). Ethnic diversity translated into diversity in political and economic interests as well.

1. American Indians. Hollywood images of wild Indians swooping in on defenseless pioneers pervade American consciousness. In fact, the integration of Indian and settler communities was much more gradual and symbiotic than popular culture reveals. As early as 1873, Indian women did laundry and cleaned homes for white settlers in Nebraska (Paine 1935:63). Indian families would raise cash to buy groceries by gathering log posts, furs, or wild fruits to sell in white towns and settlements (Cash & Hoover 1971:70,78-79; Paine 1935:63). Indian men were employed by livery stables to break in and drive horses, by the railroad to haul coal, and by the U.S. army as scouts (Johnson 1880:56; Paine 1935:63; Cash & Hoover 1971:69; see Littlefield 1991). Most towns on the border of the unorganized territory had Indian families living within the community. Non-Indian men frequently married Lakota or Pawnee women, and participated in hunting groups with their wives' relatives (Paine 1935:17,28-29,36). The Lakota had recognized treaty rights to hunt in western Nebraska until 1874 (Paine 1935:11,50; Johnston 1948:79; Dunlay 1988:138). The early economy of the Dakotas was so shaky from extended drought that U.S. government contracts to supply Indian annuities and rations were a major source of income for Dakota settlers (Lamar 1956:108,284; Limerick 1987:83-84). When the Secretary of the Interior tried to investigate corruption in these contracts, the entire Territorial government and settlers protested and stonewalled the inquiry (Lamar 1956:107-08). While the popular image is of Indians victimizing pioneers, Indian people bore the brunt of contradictions between the two social and economic systems (Limerick 1987:47). There were reported instances of pioneers killed by Indians, but all Indians were viewed as a homogenous, unified group resisting whites in a "war" (Johnson 1880:155,159-60,429; Paine 1935:64-65; Jones 1988:126; Dunlay 1988:149). Settlers justified mistreating Indian people with the rhetoric of Indians "lurking in heathenish darkness" (Johnson 1880:viii). Even though

Indians were wage laborers within these communities, public authorities failed to extend law enforcement to include their protection. "Frank West, while drunk in Niobrara, deliberately shot and killed a Ponca Indian. No arrest." (Johnson 1880:429). Stories by settlers about their own treatment of Indian people offer some insights into Indian-white conflicts. Cattlemen who lost cattle in a severe winter claimed the Lakota killed them for food and billed the U.S. Government for their loss, which in turn was subtracted from the treaty annuities of the Lakota (Paine 1935:86-87). A white settler stole the horses of a Lakota party hunting in western Nebraska, and his neighbors told the Lakota that the Pawnee had taken them, sparking intertribal violence (Paine 1935:50). Because unscrupulous merchants would cheat Indian customers paying with cash, Indian laborers preferred to be paid in food and other supplies (Paine 1935:64; Cash & Hoover 1971:70). Settlers squatted on Indian lands and refused to move unless physically ejected by the U.S. military. Rather than risk politically alienating settler populations, the government adopted a policy of land allotment and opening "surplus" Indian lands to white settlement instead (Robinson 1905:152-53; Johnston 1948:38,77; Limerick 1987:61; Jones 1988:129). Despite underlying tensions, there were several thousand Indian families engaged in farming in Nebraska and the Dakotas by 1900 (O'Neill 1875:32; Johnson 1880:57-60,429; Cash & Hoover 69,78,90-91). A Dakota Sioux man from the Sisseton Reservation recalled that in his childhood [e]very family on this reservation farmed. Some of them got along pretty good. They put up all the hay they could, that they were going to use, and they raised feed. My dad, he farmed fifty acres, and he would get a good crop, all the time until 1887. Then no rain came for seven years, up to 1894. Wheat would grow only five or six bushels to the acre. And the price was only forty cents a bushel at that time. The white man can always remember that, you know, Cleveland times they say, Democrats. (Cash & Hoover 1971:90-91). Under provisions of the Homestead Act, Indian families that abandoned tribal relations and adopted white men's ways were eligible to stake a 160 acre claim (Hagerty 1889:5). Nevertheless, the perspectives of Indian farmers were not among those expressed in the Populist movement. Indians were not granted U.S. citizenship and voting rights until 1924 (Johnston 1948:21 n.74). In the language of the movement, Indians remained a barrier to settlement, an "obstacle to progress," part of an eastern conspiracy to deprive settlers of the best lands (Taylor 1898:63-64; Schmidt & Ross 1925:401; Johnston 1948:5,13; Lamar 1956:102; Limerick 1987:46). Rather than giving Indians market price for their "surplus" lands (see Johnson 1880:103), the Populist platform demanded that they be open for free claim under the Homestead Act (Johnston 1948:30,33,43; Douglas 1969:102).

2. Foreign Immigrants. Immigrants from Germany, Sweden, Norway, Russia, England, and Ireland joined the sweep of settlers to the Plains from the 1860s through the 1890s. Any immigrant otherwise eligible to Homestead who filed a declaration of intention to become a U.S. citizen could file a claim (O'Neill 1875:16-17). Some families migrated in groups or colonies and formed culturally coherent communities in the totally new surroundings of the Plains (O'Neill 1875:15-16; Johnson 1880:390-91; Raaen 1950). This did not insulate them from political contests over parochial schools, the exclusion of foreigners from land ownership, or access to political office (Lamar 1956:246; Douglas 1969:84; Klepper 1978:20). Many immigrants with backgrounds in higher education were treated as ignorant, indolent drudges by the xenophobic English speaking cultural elite (Johnson 1880:163; Raaen 1950:18; Gates 1973:291). The cost of coming from

Europe often made a return home impossible, even when the bubble of wealth and opportunity was burst on arrival to a cultural wasteland (Taylor 1898:54; Gates 1973:312; Arends 1989:54). One woman described her experience of moving from Swindon, England to Frontier County Nebraska in 1878, based on the glowing accounts of a cousin there named Kirby. When Kirby finally drove in for them and took them to his home, they found he had a three-room dug-out built back into a hill. . . On the trip out from Plum Creek they only passed one habitation, and but little sod had been turned for farming. She admits that she spent the first two weeks in Frontier county crying, and has never ceased to wish they had gone back immediately. They got their homestead in August 1878, and their first sod house had to be occupied before the roof was completed and some hard rains made the floor a great mudhole, in which the children and furniture were mixed. (Paine 1935:38-39). These immigrant farmers were unlikely supporters of the Populist plank to exclude foreigners from land ownership. Among the Populist "successes" were an 1887 Nebraska act prohibiting aliens from acquiring land, and similar U.S. Congressional provisions governing lands in U.S. territories (Taylor 1898:67; Gates 1973:293).

III. Who Were the Agrarian Revolutionaries? Now that the diversity of experience on the Plains has been outlined, the question is exactly which "farmers" supported and controlled the political parties that came to be identified with "agrarian revolt." Most evidence frames these "agrarian revolts" as white, "native American" male, land owners' movements, predominantly supported by the middle size land owning class (Gates 1973:285; cf. Wolf 1969). In the brief spans of prosperity, it was the farmers with rapidly rising land values, not the poor or landless farmers, who became most indebted and therefore were the most concerned about monetary policy (Simons 1902:143; Handlin 1965:179; Douglas 1969:95). These land holders were confronted with the potential of losing their stake in commercial competition if the negative economic trends continued (Shannon 1957:53; Douglas 1969:87; Gates 1973:293; Klepper 1978:79). These middle level farming entrepreneurs may have also suffered from a relative deprivation or status resentment in relation to the other capitalist sectors of the economy (Klepper 1978:10; Woodward 1959:163; cf. Popkin 1979). Those who settled on the Plains with moderate amounts of capital expected great profits and economic opportunities. While the urban industrial sector of the nation achieved these dreams, the small agrarian capitalists were treading water, producing more and more for a relatively stagnant level of income and no prospects of significantly increased profits. These were the group of farmers with the combination of economic frustration and political power to systematically take on the two party system. In assessing collateral support for the agrarian movements, it is apparent that the landless laborers had little to gain from the goals of these movements (Gates 1973:324). As the critics of the free-silver movement pointed out, no level of increase in the money supply would put money in the hands of totally impoverished farmers and laborers (Morton 1895:198-99; Douglas 1969:99). One had to be in a position to produce surplus for sale to benefit from inflation in crop prices. Some authors argue that the smallest farmers were too poor and hopeless to exert the effort to organize revolt (Shannon 1957:53; cf. Popkin 1979). A fall below the subsistence level or tenant grievances could not have been the motivating factors behind these movements because the agrarian platforms contained no land redistribution or direct supports for the poorest farmers and landless laborers (contra Scott 1976). It is even difficult to argue for any loss or transformation of some moral economy between the

poor tenants and the landowners, since the longest any community involved in these movements had been settled for was 30 years (Simons 1902:11-12; Schmidt & Ross 1925:337; Douglas 1969:62; contra Scott 1976, 1985). These marginalized groups engaged the most in types of informal resistance, such as rent strikes, Temperance raids, and unorganized acts of violence (cf. Scott 1985). For the poor farmers and laborers, and disenfranchised women, Indians and immigrants, there was not enough access to the political system to dramatize their grievance or win the attention of the agrarian parties. The interests of these groups conflicted with the broader structural position of the richer, male, voting members of these agrarian movements (Gates 1973:285). Whereas the laborers and poor tenants were displaced by increased agricultural technology, the agrarian movements included cooperative manufacturing and production of agricultural machinery and government support for technological research in their platform (True 1928:13,14,21; Douglas 1969:65; Carstensen 1974:10-11). These movements were not a protest for socialism or an overthrow of the government, but on the contrary were a call for a greater role for government in insuring the efficient operation of a free market system (Hicks 1941:150-51; Taylor 1953:10; Douglas 1969:87; Gates 1973:312-13; Carstensen 1974:10; Limerick 1987:129). Some have argued that what was characterized as an agrarian movement actually came to serve the diverse interests of other fragments of the rural middle class. "[T]he most effective supporters were not farmers at all, who were too thinly spread to be politically effective, but town merchants and small businessmen who suffered most from railroad price practices" (Simons 1902:141; Carstensen 1974:18; Morris 1976:296). Similarly, the leaders who controlled the movement were invariably not small farmers but local lawyers, doctors, newspaper editors and professional politicians (Lamar 1956:246; Douglas 1969:98; Gates 1973:324; Carstensen 1974:18; Limerick 1987:84). One of the constant frustrations among farmers was that politicians and officials were either unfamiliar with farm issues or coopted by larger business interests, locking out farmers from control (Lamar 1956:212; Douglas 1969:98; Carstensen 1974:27,49; Limerick 1987:212).

IV. Why the Rhetoric of "Revolution"? The question remains why these middle farmer movements were and continue to be portrayed as radical and revolutionary. These were certainly not social revolutions in the sense of "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures" (Skocpol 1979:4). Even a broader Marxist definition of revolution as a transformation to a new mode of production brought about by new forces of production outstripping former social relations would be difficult to extract from these movements (Marx 1859). In the more popular usage of revolt, there was no storming of institutions or guerrilla warfare. For the most part, these movements were peaceful, organized contests of the two party system made within the normal channels of the U.S. political structure (Taylor 1953:7; Douglas 1969:86; Klepper 1978:43,80). Yet the terminology of radical revolt continues. While there is no definitive answer, three proposals may be offered for the persistence of the radical tag. First, the revolutionary ascription could be explained as a contest for control over the rhetoric of corporate hegemony (Green 1987:29-31,39). Initially, farmers had taken on the capitalist mantle of rugged individualism with gusto (Shannon 1957:95; Green 1987:26-27,31). Once their language turned to government regulation and cooperative marketing, they were attacking the tradition of individual market activity with the pejorative specter of "paternalism", and were therefore ideologically radical (Douglas 1969:68; Green 1987:1,7,32). Questioning the adequacy of

the two party system itself posed enough of a threat to the orderly control of the State by the rules of capitalist enterprise to earn the label of radical (Douglas 1969:97; Klepper 1978:7,15-16). An alternative explanation is born of the fact that the history of the Plains was being consciously created even as it was happening. The rhetoric of equal opportunity and pioneer democracy in propaganda of the U.S. government, state immigration boards, and railroad and real estate agents was so pervasive and compelling that no amount of actual experience on the Plains could counteract it (Limerick 1987:83). The view of farmers as self-subsistent, independent men dwelling in peace, untouched by the sordid lust for gain was continuously reproduced by urban newspapers, preachers and politicians who had never farmed (Carstensen 1974:12; cf. Hobsbawm & Rude 1975). Political protest of any sort could only be interpreted in the context of homogenous yeoman farmers, working hard to permanently settle on small plots of land with blood, sweat and tears. Any more segmentary analysis of these agrarian movements would have contested aspects of the pioneer myth. The only enemy was the easterner, urban dweller, or foreigner, not the land owner next door (Douglas 1969:96; Gates 1973:324; Limerick 1987:47). The pioneer myth had more to offer both the middle level farmers and their opponents than either side had to gain by exposing its middle class, capitalist nature in contrast to the grievances of the real agrarian poor. Therefore, revolt was permanently attached to the safety of middle class political organization. Finally, an economic explanation may be derived from the emergence of agricultural and industrial capitalism in this time period. Prior to the Civil War, the noble, self-sufficient, subsistence yeoman farmer was imagined as the backbone and life blood of America (Douglas 1969:94-96; Limerick 1987:68-69). After the Civil War, urban industrialization gradually began to dominate the U.S. economy as fewer people lived in rural areas and more lived in urban areas (Simons 1902:62,139-40; Schmidt & Ross 1925:454; Taylor 1953:89; Shannon 1957:95). Republican corporate interests denigrated the legitimate political activity of small scale capitalist agriculturalists as "radical" and "revolutionary," to transform the noble backbone into the unruly redneck (Schmidt & Ross 1925:455; compare Johnson 1880:184 and Simons 1902:63). Populist candidates were portrayed as ill-mannered, crude, uncivilized and easily dismissed as irrationally impassioned (Shannon 1957:69; Carstensen 1974:11). Agrarian interests could then be marginalized relative to the dominant concerns of consolidated merchant industrial development. Conclusion The Great Plains experienced a rapid and massive demographic transformation in the late 19th century as railroads, speculators, commercial farmers, and landless poor all flocked to land resources controlled by the U.S. Government. Despite the imagery of free or inexpensive land for anyone willing to invest their labor, Government policies actually facilitated the western expansion of economic sectors already possessing capital. Between 1862 and 1900, the Grange and Populist movements organized around issues like monopoly regulation, taxation, money supply and limits on foreign ownership of land. Despite the portrayal of these movements as mass uprisings by the homogenous agrarian populus, farm laborers, tenants and disenfranchised women, Indians, and immigrants on the Plains were not incorporated into the agenda of "agrarian revolt." These movements reflected politically organized efforts by landowning commercial agriculturalists to gain government support in their competition against the other capitalist segments penetrating the rural economy, such as railroads, commodity brokers, and banks. Issues that presented a challenge to the orthodoxy of Plains capitalism, like

land redistribution, voting rights, or fair wages for rural workers, were excluded from the political consciousness of these movements. The characterization of these movements as revolutionary has more to do with contests between sectors of capitalist production or between factions of the capitalist class than with any serious challenge to the governmental, economic or social structure of the U.S. at this time.

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## Notes

Nebraska was organized as a territory in 1854 and became a state in 1867 (O'Neill 1875:9; Johnson 1880:47; Jones 1988:121). The Dakota Territory, created in 1861, initially included all the land that is now South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana. This paper will concentrate on the region of present-day South Dakota, which became a state in 1889 (Robinson 1905:166,170; Shannon 1957:67). This region shares an ecological environment that will be referred to as the Great Plains or Plains. To be eligible to file a Homestead claim, an individual had to be age 21, the head of a family, and a U.S. citizen or alien who filed a declaration of intent to become a citizen (O'Neill 1875:16-17; Johnson 1880:105; Hervey 1903:92-93). See pp. 16 & 21 below. An area totalling one-tenth of the U.S. was given to railroads by the U.S. government. In Nebraska alone, close to 9.5 million acres were given to railroads, the bulk of which was resold for between \$2 and \$10 per acre to profit the railroads (Johnson 1880:94-95,99-100; Taylor 1898:60; Taylor 1953:96; Shannon 1957:45; Douglas 1969:59). Nearly 5 million white Americans crossed the Mississippi River into lands occupied by Indians in the West and Plains from 1850-1870 (Jones 1988:121). White settlement in Nebraska increased from 4500 in 1855 to 386,410 in 1879 and 1,058,910 in 1890, while in South Dakota there was an increase from 135,000 to 500,000 between 1890 and 1900 (Johnson 1880:150,170; Simons 1902:39; Hervey 1903:24; Lamar 1956:246). Across the U.S., the extent of railroads increased from 31,000 miles in 1860 to 200,000 miles in 1900 (Taylor 1953:90; Carstensen 1974:7-8). In Nebraska, railroad miles increased from none in 1860 to 1384 miles in 1879, at an average cost of \$43,476 per mile (Johnson 1880:109-110; Hervey 1903:111). The total amount of land included under the Homestead provisions was less than one-quarter of the lands given free to railroad companies, belying the intent of the U.S. government to widely distribute farm land ownership. In Nebraska, almost 9.5 million acres were given to railroads, but less than 1.5 million acres were available for Homestead claims (Shannon 1957:45; Douglas 1969:59; Diller 1941:24-25). The number of farms in the U.S. increased from 2 million in 1860 to 5.7 million in 1900 (Carstensen 1974:2; Schmidt & Ross 1925:332). In South Dakota, there was an increase in the

number of farmers from 17,000 in 1880 to 80,000 in 1889 (Hagerty 1889:71). In Nebraska, the number of farms in 1900 (121,525) exceeded the number of acres farmed in 1860 (118,789) (Hervey 1903:24-25). Nation wide, the production of wheat increased from 173 million bushel in 1860 to 600 million bushel in 1900, while the production of corn increased from 838 million bushel in 1860 to 2600 million bushel in 1900 (Taylor 1953:90; Carstensen 1974:2). In Nebraska, wheat production increased from 147,000 bushel in 1860 to 43 million bushel in 1903, while corn production increased from 1.48 million bushel in 1860 to 222 million bushel in 1903 (Johnson 1880:80; Hervey 1903:101). In 1866, corn sold for 65 cents per bushel and wheat for \$2.00 per bushel. By 1890, corn sold for 27 cents per bushel and wheat for less than \$1.00 (Taylor 1953:91; Shannon 1957:52; Carstensen 1974:13). In the 1870s, male farm hands in Nebraska were paid \$15 to \$25 per month, while servant "girls" were paid \$10 to \$18, generally on a seasonal basis. By 1900, the average yearly income of farm wage laborers was \$117 (O'Neill 1875:20; Shannon 1957:10; Primack 1977:182). Among the Plains wage labor alternatives before 1900 were wagon drivers, railroad workers, nail, lead, sugar beet and other factory workers, and brewery and distillery hands (Johnson 1880:118,182-83; Hervey 1903:26; Paine 1935:34). In areas where land had been privately owned for only 20 years, 25% to 45% of the farmers were tenants. Some counties in eastern Nebraska had a majority of sharecropping tenant farmers (Taylor 1898:42; Diller 1941:48; Gates 1973:273,300). Between 1855 and 1878, 19,728 foreign immigrants settled in Nebraska, and 5300 settled in the Dakotas (Johnson 1880:165-66; Taylor 1898:59; Gates 1973:243; Limerick 1987:260). It may be argued that the fact that most of the Populist platform has been adopted by the U.S. government in the 20th century is proof of the essentially conservative nature of these movements (Hicks 1941:151-52; Shannon 1957:72-73; Douglas 1969:104; Carstensen 1974:15).