H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Scott M. Gelber. *The University and the People: Envisioning American Higher Education in an Era of Populist Protest.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. 264 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-28464-0.

Reviewed by Mark Oromaner
Published on H-Education (September, 2012)
Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik

Academic Populists and the American State University

In *The University and the People*, Scott M. Gelber explores the relationship of the nineteenth-century American Populist movement to state universities. This book is an important study, for while Populist support for informal and common schools has been well documented, its "enthusiasm for *higher* education remains underappreciated" (p. 4, emphasis in original). Gelber is an assistant professor of education and (by courtesy) of history at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. He has done a very good job of turning a Harvard University dissertation ("Academic Populism: The People's Revolt and Public Higher Education, 1880-1905," 2008) into a jargon free and well-written book that is likely to appeal to a broad audience of specialists and nonspecialists interested in American higher education and/or American political movements. Scholars who wish to pursue Gelber's argument are likely to benefit from the 70 pages of notes that support the 181 pages of text.

In place of a straightforward and general definition of Populism, Gelber posits that two fundamental aspects of the movement's ideology contributed to its vision of higher education: firstly, the celebration of the capabilities and virtues of ordinary citizens (egalitarianism); and secondly, the view that elites tended to monopolize resources at the expense of farmers and laborers (producerism). The book focuses on the Populists who were the most vocal supporters of the movement's vision for higher education. These academic Populists tended to be university presidents or trustees endorsed by Populists; faculty members and students directly related to the movement; and Populist politicians, leaders, or editors who had a particular interest in education. As is true in many underdog movements, "most academic Populists were relatively privileged individuals" (p. 13). For example, most had completed some form of higher education.

In terms of race and gender, the Populists often promoted opportunities for women (i.e., expansion of college access [coeducation in the West and single-sex colleges in the South]). However, "Populism's potential to promote interracial solidarity fell tragically short" (p. 11). Indeed, Populists often endorsed racial discrimination and "tended to ignore lynching, unequal educational facilities, violations of voting rights, and exploitation of black tenant farmers" (p. 12). The issues of race, and to a lesser degree gender, support Gelber's introductory observation that academic Populists had their "limits, contradictions, and failures" (p. 17).

Gelber concentrates on the southern and the western states where the effect of academic Populism was greatest. In comparison to eastern states, states in these regions also had the largest percentage of student enrollments in public universities. More specifically, he focuses on the role of academic Populists in Kansas, Nebraska, and North Carolina. This sample is not representative of states or universities; however, the stories from these states "provide dramatic examples of Populist pressures that faced virtually all state universities, especially institutions that received proceeds from federal land grants" (p. 14). Those grants came from the two Morrill acts of 1862 and 1890.

The first Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 provided each state with a portion of federal land that could be sold to generate funds for universities to teach agriculture, mechanical arts, and military arts. The assumptions behind this act were that previously underserved populations, such as laborers and farmers, would more likely be attracted by this more applied curriculum than by the classical liberal arts and that these fields would gain in status through their association with higher education. In addition to the courses cited, the act also stated that the "primary object" of land grant colleges was "'to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life"' (p.

24).

This broad and ambiguous language meant that university administrators could interpret the act to mean that they could use funds to strengthen their liberal arts programs and to add some science courses while agrarian leaders expected enhanced and new agricultural programs. As a result of this lack of support for agricultural programs, the scarcity of qualified agricultural educators, and low enrollments in such programs, the period following the passage of the first Morrill Act could be defined as a failure from a Populist perspective. In quantitative terms, no student graduated from the agriculture program at the University of Wisconsin until 1880 or from the program at the University of Minnesota until 1899. And, at the forerunner of the University of Illinois, the Illinois Industrial University, an average of only ten students selected the agriculture program each year until the turn of the twentieth century.

Given the Populists' racism, it should come as no surprise that in general they opposed, ignored, or evaded provisions of the second Morrill Act of 1890. The act called for some form of agricultural and mechanical education for African Americans. For example, in North Carolina, rather than integrate existing universities, Populists supported the establishment of the North Carolina Colored Agricultural and Mechanical College (now North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University).

During the 1870s and early 1880s, leaders of chapters of the Grange, an organization led by landholders and founded in 1867, became prominent spokespeople who demanded access to public higher education. They believed that rural youth would benefit from agricultural instruction more than from basic science or the traditional curriculum and that colleges should become more accessible to these students. Such views paralleled the opinions of Populists. Grangers in state legislatures were successful in supporting funding for state agricultural universities and agriculture programs and in diverting funds from private institutions and from state universities that did not support such programs. The Grange was not opposed to support for public higher education in principle. Rather, "Grange leaders hoped that an accessible and vocational course of study could enrich the lives of workers without necessarily promoting class divisions" (p. 34). This argument was central to the position of the Populists who became the leading voices of rural activism.

The three states chosen for study represent cases where academic Populists were able to bring state universities into greater conformity with the movement's ideology. In North Carolina, political activists were able to divert land grant funds from the University of North Carolina. The funds went to the new North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts, founded in 1887, which later became North Carolina State University.

In the early 1890s, a fusion of the People's (Populist) Party and the Democratic Party was able to gain partial control of the Kansas legislature and to elect a governor. However, the Republicans were able to maintain control of both the university and the state normal school in Emporia. In the late 1890s, the Populists were more successful in reorganizing Kansas State Agricultural College (now Kansas State University). Between 1900 and 1904, Populists and their allies formed a ruling group on the board of the University of Nebraska.

Throughout the book, Gelber makes it clear that "most claims about the movement's impact must remain tentative because the few instances of administrative control were too short-lived and too incomplete to provide sufficient data" (p. 13). The three state takeovers, however short-lived, are important because they "often belied assumptions about the movement's attitude toward public higher education" (p. 49). Populists were enthusiastic supporters of the potential of public higher education to provide ordinary farmers and their children, especially sons, with access to a relevant education that would empower them. At a practical level they had to confront issues at the center of debates about higher education today. These questions include: admission standards, basic skills and remedial courses, financial aid, tuition, coeducation, and curriculum content. However, if they supported affirmative action for rural and farm students, they neglected to support such action for racial and ethnic minorities.

In spite of some data indicating that enrollments increased during periods of control by the Populists, they "failed to reconcile the ideals of individual advancement and social equality" (p. 102). Rather than enroll in agricultural courses and return to the farm, students were more likely to enroll in commercial programs, teacher education, or engineering courses, and to migrate away from farming. For example, less than 2 percent of land grant college graduates pursued agricultural programs by 1900 and approximately half of such graduates worked in other fields. The conflict for the Populists can be expressed in a paraphrase of two 1919 song titles, "How Ya Gonna Keep Em Down on the Farm (After They've Seen Paree)?" and "How Ya Gonna Keep Em Down on the Farm (After They've Been to University)?"

Regardless of their failures in terms of goals for stu-

dents, an indication of the enthusiasm that Populists had for higher education can be seen in their often critical attitudes concerning the role of intercollegiate sports at public universities. Did the tax funds spent on such activities detract from the academic missions of such institutions? In 1897, the Populist publication *Jeffersonian* "called for the university (University of Kansas) to fire its football coach, arguing that his salary could not be justified when farmers struggled to make ends meet" (p. 48). At a more general level, Gelber titles chapter 7 "Watchdogs of the Treasury," by which he means that once Populists gained control of state legislatures they were frugal with state funds and opposed increases for faculty salaries and research; however, they supported funds for purposes consistent with their ideology, such as tuition subsidies and new buildings.

Dominance of the academic Populists was short-lived and often failed to achieve anticipated goals. Their actions did not result in significant increases in enrollments of farmers in agricultural courses nor in the return of college-educated students to the farm. However, in his cogent narrative, Gelber demonstrates that they were not opposed to public higher education in principle but that they were enthusiastic supporters of such education that was more egalitarian and relevant to the lives of farmers and laborers. With the publication of *The University and the People*, there is no reason for anyone to fail to appreciate the Populists' role in the evolution of American state universities. Although, at times, the specifics of their responses may differ from those of their current counterparts, academic Populists raised ongoing fundamental issues of accessibility, accountability, and affordability in a public mass higher education system.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Mark Oromaner. Review of Gelber, Scott M., *The University and the People: Envisioning American Higher Education in an Era of Populist Protest.* H-Education, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36225

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.