1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Bouratoglou, Max (2022) "Race, Class, and Populism: Thomas Watson and the Fall of the Agrarian Ideal," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2022.120105

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol12/iss1/5>

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Race, Class, and Populism:

Thomas Watson and the Fall of the Agrarian Ideal

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Thomas Watson (1856-1922) occupies an important, forgotten, and contradictory position in American political history. In many ways he correctly perceived the desire for change and pushed for the drastic political realignment following a period of widening wealth inequality, and the slow, but real death of the agrarian ideal. Perhaps best described as a political rebel, Watson rejected the pro-business and industrial political orthodoxy of the Gilded Age, instead adhering to Jeffersonian ideals on which the country had been founded. Most important was a radical belief in democracy and in ordinary people. Watson spoke for the voices which had been silenced; the agrarian, self-sufficient way of life which was becoming a relic in this age of industrialization. Watson not only rejected the economic order of the “New South,” but the Jim Crow racial order as well. He believed both white and black farmers shared the same material interests and, together, could fundamentally rekindle and reimagine the agrarian ideal which had for so long excluded black farmers. Watson, however, failed to materialize his plan, and grew increasingly cynical towards the possibility of a cross-racial agrarian politics. Disillusioned with his ability to enact change and democracy more generally, Watson rejected the possibility of

creating a political realignment and became nothing more than one of the same race baiting, white supremacist demagogues which he had for so long critiqued.

In attempting to portray Watson's conservative and racist shift, historians often point to the eight year hiatus Watson took from politics following the debacle of the 1896 presidential election.¹ Certainly this period increased his conservative tendencies, and he even emerged from his hiatus as an open and proud white supremacist, calling himself in a later election the only politician who was "standing squarely for White Supremacy."² Watson advocated for restrictive voting laws arguing that "the white people dare not revolt so long as they can be intimidated by the fear of the [black] vote."³ For somebody explicitly using race and white supremacy for his own political gain, Watson's justification is riddled with irony and disgusting contradictions. All of this holds true, but it was not the main propellant for his conservative shift. Following the loss of 1894, Watson rejected his ideal of a multiracial agrarian democracy run by and for the masses. Watson abandoned the budding seeds of a political realignment which he correctly saw the potential for. He used the politics of white supremacy and eliminated the radical and more distributive economic policies — the free and unlimited coinage of silver and the subtreasury plan—from his platform.

On September 5, 1856 Thomas Watson was born in Thomson, Georgia. Born into a family of Southern slaveholders, his life changed drastically following the end of the Civil War. With the Confederate money which the family held worthless, and slavery abolished, the Watsons drifted into a life of insecurity and poverty. With turmoil pervading his childhood,

¹ The most clear example of this is the Southern historian C Vann Woodward's biography *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (S.I., GA: OUP USA, 1987).

² C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel*, 471.

³ *Weekly Jeffersonian* March 24, 1910.

Watson threw himself into his studies, reading whatever he could get his hands on.

Demonstrating his educational aptitude, Watson followed his former high school teacher Professor Steed to Mercer University at the age of 15. While Watson continued his studies for two years, neither he nor his family could pay the tuition, and in the summer of 1874 he returned to Thomson. Under the tutelage of Judge W.R. McLaws, Watson read law. Having passed the bar examination, Watson obtained his license to practice law on October 19, 1875. Determined to lift his family from poverty, Watson worked constantly to incredible success. “His talent was reserved for the defense. He was a tribune of the people, and hundreds had found shelter within his voice.”⁴ Tied geographically to the agrarian masses, and devoting himself to them in his law practice, Tom Watson emerged as a fighter and believer in the people.

Following the end of Reconstruction in Georgia, a new political and ideological power emerged in the state. In 1872, the Democratic Party regained its control of all three branches of the state government through a new faction: The New Departure Democrats.⁵ In an attempt to distance themselves from slavery and the Confederacy, this new faction avoided explicitly advocating for a return to the status quo ante bellum social and political order. While they acknowledged a shift in the racial order after the Civil War and Reconstruction, the New Departure Democrats committed themselves to upholding white supremacy and the political disenfranchisement of black Americans. They attempted to broaden their political base and gain the support of Northern Democrats and businessmen through free market economic policies. In rejecting the racial revolution of Reconstruction, the New Departure Democrats developed an

⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel*, 70.

⁵ Judson Clements Ward Jr, “The New Departure of Democrats of Georgia: An Interpretation,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* (1957): 227-236.

economic revolution. Led by Henry Grady (1850-1889) and his “New South” dream, they advocated modernization and industrialization through railroads, banking, business, and industry. To say this coalition represented the masses would be disingenuous. Rather, through demonizing the Republican Party, and there being no real alternative that fought for the masses, the New Departure Democrats held power in Georgia for 19 years.⁶

In contrast to the New Departure Democrats, Watson’s politics evolved from the Jeffersonian agrarian tradition, developing a “producer ethics,” which linked farmers, artisans, laborers, businessmen, and manufacturers as “carriers of value,” in contrast to the parasitic, and anti-American bankers and monopolists. Watson’s rural Southern upbringing, living through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the “New South,” also was instrumental in developing his agrarian politics. Watson rejected the New South and, while not endorsing the Lost Cause, viewed himself emulating the agrarian Old South politics. Watson’s largest contemporary influences were Alexander Stephens (1812-1883) and Robert Toombs (1810-1885). Both men had served as high ranking officials within the Confederate government, Stephens as Vice president and Toombs as Secretary of State, but it was not their links to the Confederacy which interested Watson. Labeled “son of the plain people,” Stephens represented the vision of a Southern agrarian populism, while Watson described Toombs as “a man who loved the South with all his mind and soul and heart, hating intensely everything and everybody who hated her.”⁷ Like Stephens’ and Toombs’, Watson’s politics diverged from the industrial, pro-business New Departure politics which had come to define the Democratic Party following Reconstruction. In

⁶ Judson Clements Ward Jr, “The New Departure of Democrats of Georgia,” 227-236.

⁷ Thomas E. Watson, *Bethany: A Story of the Old South* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 27.

this spirit of an agrarian Old South, Watson's entrance into politics came during the 1880 Georgia Democratic Convention, when Watson adamantly opposed the New Departure Democrat Alfred Colquitt (1824-1894). While his speech was relatively tame in comparison to his more radical addresses that would follow, Watson proved his place as a rebel within Georgian politics.

As the New Departure Democrats continued their control over the Democratic Party in Georgia throughout the 1880s, Watson found himself on the outside looking in. Like Watson, farmers too began to reject the New Departure Democrats and the New South. The crop-lien system, in which sharecroppers and tenant farmers did not own the land they worked and obtained supplies and food on credit from local merchants, placed farmers into a state of peonage.⁸ While the country as a whole was growing richer, farmers were being thrown into abject poverty. While in 1880 Watson's radical agrarianism seemed somewhat out of place, by the end of the decade antagonisms increasingly emerged between farmers and the leaders of the New South. Watson, seeing this frustration, became the voice and a fighter for farmers regardless of their race. "Here is a tenant—I do not know, or care, whether he is white or black, I know his story. He starts in and pays \$25 for a mule, 1,000 pounds of cotton for rent, and two bales for supplies. By the time he pays for that mule, and the store account, and the guano, he has not enough money left to buy a bottle of laudanum, and not enough cotton to stuff his old lady's ear."⁹ Rejecting the politics of white supremacy and industrialization which had benefited the capitalist class, Watson advocated for a cross-racial agrarian politics.

⁸ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel*, 159.

⁹ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, October 18, 1892.

Watson was not alone in this vision of a new, alternative politics. Across the South and West farmers flocked to the burgeoning Farmers' Alliance, and by 1890 the organization attained a membership of over three million. Its chief goal was to gain more authority for the farmers, and specifically to abolish the crop-lien system which had placed so many farmers into peonage. Importantly, and in distinction to Watson, the Alliance saw the black farmer as “too costly a sacrifice to white supremacy,” and instead organized over one million black farmers in a parallel Alliance.¹⁰ Somewhat ironically Watson, who was still practicing law at the time, was barred from joining the Alliance due to its exclusion of practicing lawyers. Perhaps one of its largest supporters ideologically, and, on the issue of race, more radical, Watson was unable to officially join the Alliance. In an attempt to move explicitly into the realm of politics, the Farmers' Alliance evolved into the People's or Populist Party.

In 1890 Watson ran for the House of Representatives from Georgia's 10th district. His opponent was George Barnes (1833-1901), a New Departure Democrat and incumbent, who also served as the president of the Augusta Gas Company and profited greatly off of the railroad industry. Speaking of Barnes, Watson said that he “didn't say a word about the great revolution that is taking place among the people,” and he had “contributed nothing to the enthusiasm which exists among the people for reform.”¹¹ In Watson's view, Barnes did not understand the growing Alliance and populist movement; he had lost touch with the masses and was out of sympathy with them. An exchange from Barnes and a spectator at a debate during the campaign best encapsulates the realigning politics. “Six years ago you sent me to Congress and you have re-elected me, and all the time I have served you to the best of my ability. You endorsed me and

¹⁰ Rebecca Latimer Felton, *My Memoirs of Georgia Politics* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010).

¹¹ Thomas Watson Scrapbooks, June 9, 1890.

sent me back before; in what have I changed?’ A voice—‘Times have changed, and the people have changed.’”¹² The changing times granted Watson an overwhelming victory. Running on the Farmers' Alliance platform, Watson won in 10 of the 11 counties within the 10th district, only narrowly losing in the industrial county of Richmond, Barnes' home county.

Committing himself to government fully, Watson stopped practicing law and established the *People's Party Paper* which was to “champion the Jeffersonian theory of popular government” and “the common people—their grievances, their hopes, their rights.”¹³ This form of media would allow Watson to stay connected to the masses, showing them the inner workings of Washington, while also proliferating the populist movement. Upon arrival in the House, Watson established and chaired the Populist caucus which adhered to the principles put forth by the People's Party in the Ocala Platform. A young Democrat from Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925), was sympathetic to the People's Party and the Populist caucus, but, despite Watson's best efforts, Bryan never joined.¹⁴ Adhering to the Ocala Platform, Watson introduced bills to levy an income tax, abolish the National Bank, to protect strikers and abolish strikebreaking such as that done by Pinkerton spies, and establish a system of sub-treasuries, as well as advocating for the political equality of black Americans.¹⁵ Importantly, Watson did differentiate rather explicitly between political and social equality for black Americans. Whereas political equality included the enfranchisement of black Americans against the growing attempts to disenfranchise them, it stopped short of eliminating certain social inequalities which affected

¹² C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel*, 194.

¹³ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, November 26, 1891.

¹⁴ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, October 13, 1893.

¹⁵ Robert M Saunders, “The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* (Fall 1970): 339-356.

black Americans such as equal treatment and opportunity regardless of race. Whether this was because of a true belief of the inferiority of black Americans, or because of the political infeasibility of such an ideal, Watson never once in his political career advocated for social equality.¹⁶ Watson elucidated this point clearly during a speech, stating that "the question of social equality does not enter into the calculation at all. That is a thing each citizen decides for himself. No statute ever yet drew the latch of the humblest home—or ever will. Each citizen regulates his own visiting list—and always will."¹⁷ In many regards, especially considering the successful attempts at the disenfranchisement of black Americans in neighboring Southern states, Watson's open and continued support for political equality for black Americans might have been as radical as he could have been.

One of the most important Alliance policies which Watson adhered to was the subtreasury plan. The plan revolutionized credit arrangement for crops, requiring the federal government to construct warehouses, or subtreasuries. At harvest, farmers would deposit crops in the subtreasuries and receive negotiable federal notes up to 80 percent of the value of the crops. The farmer then had a year to sell the crop and satisfy the notes at just a 1 percent annual interest. Private individuals generally offered credit to farmers with inordinate interest. The subtreasury plan, by placing the role of the creditor with the federal government, offered far more autonomy and was a more equitable system for farmers.¹⁸

During the election cycle of 1892 Watson, having demonstrated his radicalism and non-conformism in the House, was viewed as a threat by the Democratic party establishment. To run

¹⁶ Robert M Saunders, "The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895," 339-356.

¹⁷ Thomas E Watson, "*The (expletive) Question in the South*," October 1892.

¹⁸ James L. Hunt, "Subtreasury Plan," *NCpedia*, 2006, <https://www.ncpedia.org/subtreasury-plan>.

against Watson the Georgia Democratic party selected Major James Conquest Cross Black (1842-1928). Black rejected the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party, and summed up his ideology by stating that he "was a Democrat because he was a Georgian."¹⁹ In a conversation with a group of Georgians, Grover Cleveland (1837-1908), the Democratic nominee for president, reportedly remarked that he "was almost as much interested in Major Black's campaign in the Tenth district of Georgia as he was in his own election."²⁰ A conservative with little sympathy for the discontented masses, Black and the Georgia Democratic Party used the same tactics which had kept them in power for the past 20 years: white fear. The Democratic State Central Committee issued an appeal to the voters of the 10th district, asserting that a Populist victory would result in "[black] supremacy," "mongrelism," and the "destruction of the Saxon womanhood of our wives and daughters."²¹ *The Constitution*, a major if not the largest newspaper in all of Georgia, contended that the issue of white supremacy was of more importance than "all the financial reform in the world."²² In this sense, the entire 10th district election and the Democratic attempts to defeat Watson could be summed up through one factor: race.

Watson for his part refused to back away from his radical politics. He still viewed a coalition of farmers, West and South, black and white, as integral to bringing about the political realignment which he envisioned. Race hatred and the politics of white supremacy only meant more economic profits for the elite, and more exploitation for the farmers. In a speech during the

¹⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel*, 272.

²⁰ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, April 7, 1893.

²¹ T. Warren Aiken, quoted in an article from *Atlanta Journal*, April 7, 1892.

²² An article by *Constitution*, quoted by *The People's Party Paper*, July 15, 1892.

campaign Watson declared that “the accident of color can make no difference in the interest of farmers, croppers, and laborers...You are kept apart so that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings.”²³ Apart from simply rejecting the politics of white supremacy on economic grounds, Watson explicitly called for the enfranchisement of black Americans. During the campaign he made the plea to “wipe out the color line, and put every man on his citizenship irrespective of color.”²⁴ Watson was committed to the idea of a multiracial democracy in an era where white supremacy and the color line dominated politics.

During his campaign, H.S. Doyle (1867-1913), a black preacher, made sixty-three speeches for Watson. In one of his speeches towards the end of the campaign, Doyle was met with the threat of lynching. Recounting this event later, Watson noted that “a mob threatened this preacher in Thomson, and it became necessary for me to place him in my backyard for protection...My friends had to assemble and remain underarms, day and night.”²⁵ This anecdote demonstrates the commitment which Watson felt to an ideal of multiracial democracy. If Watson had simply viewed Doyle as a way to gain support amongst black voters it seems unlikely that he would have protected him in his own home, bringing additional danger to himself and his family.

The Georgia 10th district election of 1892 proved to be nothing more than a political farce. Practices of terror, fraud, and corruption proliferated across the district, with little to no effort by the Democratic Party to hide it. The most blatant abuses could be found in Richmond County, the only county that Watson yet again failed to carry. Despite Richmond county having a legal voting population of about 5,000, Black received 10,776 votes, more than double what

²³ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, September 26, 1892.

²⁴ Thomas E. Watson, *The Life and Speeches of Thomas. E. Watson* (Thomson, GA: Jeffersonian Pub. Co., 2005), 13.

²⁵ Thomas E. Watson, *The Life and Speeches of Thomas. E. Watson*, 16.

would be legally possible.²⁶ Under these suspicious circumstances Black proved victorious.

Black won the election Black did not win the election because of ideology. Black represented the dying politics of the New Departure Democrats. While surely racial fear mongering gained Black legitimate votes, it no longer held the political sway which it once had. Watson correctly saw and spoke to a realigning politics where class, and not race, propelled voters.

Despite this loss, Watson remained committed to a radical politics of and for the masses. He still saw the growing frustration of the farmers, and stayed committed to an economic populist agenda. Returning to Congress, where he still had a few months left, Watson proposed his most significant and lasting legislation: rural free delivery. Up until this point, individuals living in remote and rural areas would either have to travel long distances to receive their mail, or pay a private mail carrier to deliver it to them. The resolution which Watson proposed took the form of an amendment to the Post Office administration bill, diverting \$10,000 to be used by the Postmaster General in “experimental free-delivery in rural communities other than towns and villages.”²⁷ While it was not until 1896 that the program would be implemented permanently, the modern-day system of rural free delivery emerged from Watson’s 1893 resolution.

Seeing no need to alter his political vision, Watson campaigned for the 10th district in 1894 virtually on the exact same platform. Despite the calls for a more conservative People’s Party to enhance its overall popularity, Watson stayed committed to his principles, even continuing to call for the free and unlimited coinage of silver when the Omaha Platform, the party platform adopted by the national Populist Party, had called for silver and gold to be coined

²⁶ *New York Tribune*, December 20, 1892.

²⁷ Watson’s Amendment from the *Congressional House Record*, February 17, 1893, p. 1759.

at a ratio of 16-1 two years prior.²⁸ Regarding his stance on race, Watson continued to demonstrate his commitment to black enfranchisement. At the 1894 Georgia Populist convention, Watson was nominated with the audience that was upwards of 30% black.²⁹ In an attempt to convey the significance of this level of black participation in politics in the South, in the same year Texas' Populist convention had one delegation of black voters with little to no influence present at their convention, and both the Alabama and Mississippi Populist conventions refused to even seat black populists.³⁰ Watson's platform contained a condemnation of the convict lease system, as well as election and school reform laws. Again, there existed limits to Watson's endorsement of black rights. He still rejected an endorsement of social equality for black Americans, concerning himself only with political equality. While he initially failed to take a firm stance on lynching, near the end of the campaign Watson condemned violence against black Americans, "particularly such offenses as lynchings, white-capping, and Kukluxing."³¹

Whether or not Watson viewed black enfranchisement as a moral imperative is not certain. In fact, his distinction between political and social equality for black Americans seems to indicate that he cared more about their votes in terms of pushing forward his economic vision than he did for any moral grievances. It seems likely that geographically and temporally Watson would not have been able to garner the support that he got by advocating for the social equality of black Americans. That is not so much an excuse as it is a fact which better contextualizes the

²⁸ Robert M Saunders, "The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895," 339-356.

²⁹ Judson Clements Ward Jr, "The New Departure of Democrats of Georgia," 227-236.

³⁰ Dallas Morning News, June 21, 1894. *Huntsville Gazette*, January 6, 1894.

³¹ Robert M Saunders, "The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895," 339-356.

complications of race and antiblack racism in the South especially following Reconstruction. Watson was not incorrect in pointing to the shared material interests of black and white farmers, and the insidious tactics of white supremacy which were employed to break up this multiracial economic solidarity. White supremacy functioned, as W.E.B du Bois (1868-1963) later coined in his book *Black Reconstruction in America*, as a “psychological wage” which white workers received, and which diverted them from ultimately engaging in any class-based politics.³² It was what kept the New Departure Democrats in power in Georgia, and what the Democratic establishment evoked in an attempt to defeat Watson.

As the Populist Party continued to grow in popularity, propelled by the economic downturn caused by the Panic of 1893, the Democratic establishment grew increasingly worried that their Southern hegemony might be usurped by the Populists. For this reason, ensuring a Democratic victory against Georgia’s and the South’s most vocal Populist leader proved integral. The levels of fraud which occurred in the Georgia 10th district election proved to be a repetition of 1892 but on an even more egregious scale. In Richmond County, with only 11,240 possible voters, 15,980 votes were cast with only 2,200 going to Watson. Thus, despite there being only 11,240 possible votes available in the county, Black won by a majority of 13,780.³³ The outrage proved palpable, and existed not only amongst the Populists. A group of twenty-two Augusta Democrats signed and published a denunciation of the dishonest methods used in the election including having poor black voters “vote dozens of times at ten cents each.”³⁴

³² Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1962).

³³ *Constitution*, November 7, 1894.

³⁴ James C. Black and Thomas E. Watson, *Contested Election Case of Thomas E. Watson vs. J.C.C. Black, from the Tenth Congressional District of the State of Georgia* (Washington, DC: Govt. Print. Off., 1896), 675.

Rather than submit this case of fraud to the House of Representatives to review it, Watson instead, and rather credulously, proposed that Black should take his position as a member of the Fifty-fourth Congress, but resign it, effective March 4, and “refer the matter back to the people to determine by a new election who shall represent them in the Fifty-fourth Congress.”³⁵ With the Republican Party holding a majority in the House and certainly willing to deprive their Democratic rivals of a seat, and the blatant and glaring dishonesty of the election, it seems likely that a commission would have granted the victory to Watson. In attempting to understand Watson’s decision to not follow through with a Congressional commission, two reasons seem most likely. Firstly, Watson stayed committed to a politics of anti-fusionism, and potentially viewed the help from the Republican Party—a party fundamentally opposed to his politics — as compromising that stance. Second, Watson still viewed the Republican Party as fundamentally responsible for much of the Gilded Age inequalities which emerged across the country, but more specifically in the South following the end of the Civil War. He also understood the deep contempt which Southern and Georgian voters had for the Republican Party, and potentially feared the consequences of receiving aid from the party. Black, not wanting to deal with a Congressional commission, agreed to Watson’s request.

The 1895 special election proved to be a defining moment in understanding Watson’s conservative shift. Rather than feeling vindicated in the success of his political vision—having surely won both the 1892 and 1894 elections if not for immense amounts of fraud—Watson exhibited apprehension towards his radical platform. Rather than assign blame on the Democratic officials who bribed and took advantage of black voters, Watson took out his anger on black Americans. Writing of a dinner between Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) and his wife

³⁵ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, February 1, 1895.

at the White House, Watson stated that "with his white wife, leaning on one arm, and a daughter, who wore almost a BLACK SKIN, on the other. Here was social [expletive] equality and miscegenation both condoned and patronized by a Democratic President of the United States who was elected by Southern Democrats."³⁶ The implication of this description seems relatively straightforward: the Democratic party and President Cleveland believed in both social equality for black Americans and miscegenation; the Populist party did not. While Watson never advocated for the social equality of black Americans, he had never used race or white supremacy as a means for political division. He always had critiqued the usage of white supremacy by the Democratic Party as a means of eliminating multiracial solidarity and the shared material interests between white and black farmers. Now here he was employing it.

Unlike Georgia's Populist convention of 1894 in which upwards of 30% of the attendees were black, or H.S. Doyle and the countless examples of explicit organizing of black populists, there was little mention of or call to black populists in Watson's 1895 campaign.³⁷ There is no clear reason for this shift. A potential explanation could be the Democratic Party's rampant use of buying black votes, as well as the appeals made by the Democratic Party and the Southern industrialists to black voters. Regardless of the reasons for this, clearly Watson no longer viewed the attainment of black votes as feasible or important.

The 1895 special election involved similar amounts of fraud as the two prior elections. Some of this was codified by a new election registration law which passed at the end of 1894. The law set up a powerful registration committee of three in each county, which was granted the

³⁶ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, April 12, 1895.

³⁷ Robert M Saunders, "The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895," 339-356

sole power, from which there was no appeal, to draw up lists of qualified voters.³⁸ A third of all black voters in Richmond County were listed as having just attained the age of 21 within the last year, a clear indication of fraudulent tactics, or, as a Georgian populist remarked, “one of the most remarkable facts in the statistics of population.”³⁹ In Richmond County Watson received less than 5% of all black votes. While certainly fraud played a role in the election, and it is unclear if the overall increase in black vote increased in Black's favor purely due to Watson's racial shift, Watson's implementation of a politics of white supremacy should be understood as integral in his defeat. Black and the Democratic party utilized Watson's shifting racial politics against him. The *Augusta Chronicle* concluded that Watson had never done anything for the "advancement" of black Georgians and that black voters should follow Booker T. Washington's advice and support "the best Southern white."⁴⁰ No longer was the multiracial component integral to Watson's vision of an agrarian politics.

The loss of 1895 propelled Watson further to the right. It was not only his views on race which shifted, but his economic policies as well. Watson advocated for dropping the sub-treasury plan which he asserted “was never an essential principle, but a detail of distribution.”⁴¹ This proved particularly baffling, as the sub-treasury plan, first championed by the Farmers' Alliance, was one of the most influential and important policies of agrarian and populist politics in the 1890s. To simply scrap this plan as unimportant demonstrated how out of touch Watson had

³⁸ C. Vann Woodward, “Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel,” 328.

³⁹ C. Vann Woodward, “Tom Watson Agrarian Rebel,” 329.

⁴⁰ *Augusta Chronicle*, September 26, 1895.

⁴¹ Robert M Saunders, “The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895,” 339-356.

become with farmers. Instead, Watson emphasized the sanctity of private property, fought back against the rise of socialism, and denounced Catholics and Jews alike.⁴²

The Georgia Populist Convention in December of 1895 in many ways indicated the end of the Populist Party as a separate and radical political entity. Watson agreed completely with the North Carolina populist Marion Butler (1863-1938) on the vision for a conservative Populist Party, stating that “as far as I can see we are in perfect accord.”⁴³ Watson warned of the socialistic elements emerging in the party which he viewed as dangerous and un-populist. Georgia Populists, Watson asserted, would do well to “have nothing to do with any lot of extremists who make war on private property.”⁴⁴ Watson demonstrated his growing intolerance for socialists through his impatience with labor. In the 1895 Georgia platform Watson and the populists made no direct appeal to labor, nor did they even condemn the convict lease system.⁴⁵ Further illustrating this was the condemnation of fellow populist Jacob Coxey (1854-1951) at the convention. Viewed by Watson as “more extreme than most Georgia populists,” Coxey was denied an opportunity to address the convention despite a motion being passed to allow him to speak.⁴⁶ While the Populist Party added a condemnation of lynching in their platform, this was the extent of their appeals to black voters.

For himself, Watson made little attempt to elucidate his ideological and racial shift. Looking retrospectively on his political career, Watson stated that his “entire career was a

⁴² Robert M Saunders, “The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895,” 339-356.

⁴³ Watson to Marion Butler, December 23, 1895, in Marion Butler Papers (University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill).

⁴⁴ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, January 17, 1896.

⁴⁵ Robert M Saunders, “The Transformation of Tom Watson, 1894-1895,” 339-356.

⁴⁶ Thomas E Watson, *People's Party Paper*, December 27, 1895.

consistent, unswerving loyalty to what [he] thought was right."⁴⁷ This statement leaves us with more questions than answers. What was "right" about deviating so drastically from his ideal of a multiracial agrarian politics? Rather, this shift seemed to embody a more self-interested and no longer idealistic Watson. Tired of losing election after election, and understanding the futility of mass democracy in the Democratic Party's political monopoly of the South, Watson abandoned his beliefs in favor of widespread acceptance and political success. The "agrarian rebel" rebelled no longer, and what remained was a race-baiting demagogue.

About the author

Max Bouratoglou is a senior at Pomona College in Claremont, California double majoring in Politics and American Studies. He spends much of his time reading and researching and enjoys creating music in his free time. Max is originally from Brooklyn, NY.

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⁴⁷ Thomas E. Watson, *The Life and Speeches of Thomas. E. Watson*, 26.

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