

Book Review

Scott M. Gelber. *The University and the People: Envisioning American Higher Education in an Era of Populist Protest*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. 266 pp. Paper \$29.95.

To those of us who work at public universities, Scott Gelber's report that populists viewed professors as "especially attractive symbols of pampered public employment" (p. 155), "mocked the small number of hours that faculty spent in the classroom" (p. 155), and applauded the curtailment of paid sabbaticals, will be dismayingly familiar. Rather than the present economic downturn, however, *The University and the People* covers the 1880s and 1890s, when local, state, and national Farmers' Alliances and People's Parties coalesced into the Populist movement, which was especially powerful in the South, Great Plains, and West. Gelber explains that Populism's "core principles of egalitarianism and producerism" (p. 13) inspired its criticism of the faculty, which in turn caused anxiety in academia and helped shape historians' "portrayal of Populist hostility toward higher education" (p. 5). Formed amid mid-twentieth-century fears of fascism and McCarthyism, this historiographical image also resonates with the current climate. Gelber argues, however, that it is not accurate. While Populist legislators were notoriously miserly when it came to faculty salaries, they tended to "look kindly on appropriations that included funds for the physical plant, especially new buildings for the sciences and vocational studies" (p. 148). *The University and the People* makes a compelling case that "some Populists became surprisingly passionate about the core ideas of the state university" (p. 4). Gelber illustrates how Populists promoted college access for the masses, supported the expansion of the curriculum in practical fields, and advocated for professors' right to back controversial causes. Also exploring how Populist engagement with higher education "exposed deep tensions between equality and opportunity, popular sovereignty and expertise, and democracy and meritocracy" (p. 17), Gelber's book is a significant contribution to the historiography as well as broader discussions of the role of higher education.

This study is timely in light not only of Populist views of the faculty, but also of the sesquicentennial of the Morrill Land Grant Act. "Populists and their allies focused primarily on the colleges supported by the Morrill Act of 1862" (p. 4), Gelber explains, and his work is prominent in the wave of new scholarship on land grant institutions and conferences marking the anniversary. He also mentions that most of the educated members of the movement had attended denominational colleges or normal schools; it would perhaps help to explore

why they did not focus on these institutions as well as the role that Populism did play on these campuses. Still, Gelber's focus on the land grants allows him to greatly expand scholarly understanding of both Populism and the history of this type of institution. With attention to broader developments in university history and frequent references to prominent land grant institutions such as Cornell and the University of Wisconsin, he focuses primarily on three states where Populists had great influence—North Carolina, Kansas, and Nebraska—and the particular histories of their land grant universities.

In between Chapter 1, which discusses Jacksonianism and efforts of the agrarian organization the Grange to monitor implementation of the Morrill Act as “Preludes to Populism,” and Chapter 7, which discusses Populists as “Watchdogs of the Treasury” in political struggles over public funding for higher education, *The University and the People* tells the story of “academic Populists,” or “the most vocal proponents of the movement’s vision of higher education” (p. 13), including university presidents, trustees, faculty, and students who were Populists or whom Populists perceived as sympathetic, as well as movement leaders and editors who focused on higher education. In Chapter 2, Gelber explains the roles of academic Populists in campus politics, outlining events in the three states. North Carolina academic Populists’ frustration with the state university’s lack of attention to practical training led them to campaign successfully for the establishment of and support for the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (NCCAMA). Populists seized administrative control of the Kansas State Agricultural College (KSAC) and installed Populist Thomas E. Will as president, and, to the north, Populist power propelled the Republican-dominated governing board of the University of Nebraska to appoint a Populist sympathizer, James Hulme Canfield, to the presidency, and then created discord over his less sympathetic successor. These brief accounts set up the following chapters’ thoughtful exploration of the “tension between Populist enthusiasm” for democratic higher education and “Populist anxiety” (p. 60) over whether it was actually possible.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on access in, respectively, an academic and an economic sense. Excellently grounded in the somewhat limited historiography of college admissions and entrance requirements, university extension, poor students, and financial aid, these chapters explain how academic Populists worked to increase access for less advantaged rural (white) youth. They lobbied against requiring high school graduation for admission while secondary schools remained rare in rural areas. Motivated by a concern for “geographical equity” (p. 67) rather than anti-intellectualism, they also worked to improve rural K-12 schools. Until schools were more equitable geographically, they argued, land grant colleges had a duty to offer preparatory and remedial

instruction. For rural residents who were not interested in the full college experience, they promoted extension programs. Although the latter approach arguably diverted some rural students from attaining degrees, academic Populists were briefly “the loudest participants in an ongoing debate over the extent to which colleges should accommodate disadvantaged students” (p. 82). Affordability was also crucial to access, and academic Populists fought for low or subsidized tuition, opportunities for students to work on campus, and cooperative rooming and boarding facilities. Gelber states that land grant institutions began to report on social-class diversity among their students *in response to* pressure from Populists. Land grants were not the only institutions that did this, however, which suggests that while such policies coincided with Populist pressure, they were not necessarily a direct response. Gelber does acknowledge that even elite colleges accepted poor students and that Populists were not the first or only advocates of financial aid. He makes a strong case that academic Populists were “particularly ambitious” (p. 84) in their advocacy for academic and economic access; while many institutions were accessible simply because they needed students, Populists advocated for access as a matter of principle.

Anxiety is especially prominent in Chapter 5, which focuses on the Populist vision of the curriculum. Worried that college might “alienate talented rural youth from their communities and seduce them into parasitical professions” (p. 101), academic Populists sought to balance the liberal arts, which they did not oppose, with applied courses, which they hoped would “blur distinctions between farmers [and mechanics] and professionals and thereby encourage college students to return to agriculture” (p. 116). Gelber refers to the latter courses variously as *vocational*, implying preparation specifically for work, and as *practical*, suggesting hands-on learning in the democratic spirit of John Dewey and Jane Addams, whom he invokes. Vocational goals would contradict these reformers’ social intentions, which resonated with short-lived requirements at NCCAMA and other land grants that *all* students study agriculture and other practical subjects. Gelber also points out that academic Populists were unable to stem the migration of rural youth to urban professions or to increase the status of farming; his use of both *vocational* and *practical* in the chapter likely reflects academic Populists’ failure “to reconcile the ideals of individual advancement and social equality” (p. 102).

Populists experienced less tension over the role of the social sciences, as they consistently supported increased offerings in these areas with the intention of preparing farmers to resist exploitation by the likes of lawyers and bankers. It was supporting social science professors that created tension; Gelber explains in Chapter 6 that academic Populists demonstrated “conflicted respect for scholarly expertise”

(p. 127) and “a substantial degree of hypocrisy” (p. 128) regarding academic freedom. They revered professors such as Richard T. Ely whose research supported economic and social reform, but also argued that ordinary voters could solve social problems on their own. Populists at times “demanded that scholars behave like apostles of the movement” (p. 134) and academic Populists dismissed some faculty members who did not share their views—most notoriously at KSAC in 1897—yet they decried conservatives’ censure of radical academics. Gelber points out, though, that many of the professors fired by academic Populists had been ineffective, their replacements had impressive credentials, and remaining faculty and students enjoyed freedom of expression, even at KSAC. Ultimately, Gelber suggests, academic Populists were not attacking academic freedom as much as they were struggling with “enduring questions about whether academic freedom should depend on professorial nonpartisanship” (p. 128).

Throughout his discussion of academic Populists’ vision of democratic higher education in terms of academic and economic access, the curriculum, and academic freedom, Gelber naturally focuses on social class issues. He is also mindful of race and gender, threading comments about white Populists’ disregard for the plight of African Americans and advocacy of college access for rural white women into the larger discussion. These threads come together in the Conclusion, where Gelber thoughtfully discusses how Populist ideals fed into developments in twentieth-century higher education such as institutional stratification, and considers what they might contribute to the continuing pursuit of equal educational opportunity. He reflects, for example, “Populist values also offer some hope for reframing the contentious disputes that surround selective admissions and racial representation” (p. 178) by conceiving of affirmative action not as a radical departure, but as a response to class-based and geographical inequality in secondary schooling. Gelber’s final observation about Gilded Age Populism and higher education perhaps offers encouragement for public universities that currently feel under siege: “Despite its brashness, demagoguery, and occasional incoherence,” he concludes, “the Populist campaign was fundamentally optimistic about higher learning” (p. 180).