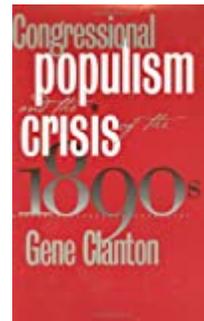




**Gene Clanton.** *Congressional Populism and the Crisis of the 1890s.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xii + 228 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0913-0.



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Until the appearance of Gene Clanton's new book, no one had studied the fifty men who represented the People's Party in Congress. Populist representation began with eleven in the Fifty-second Congress (1891-1893), reached a high point with thirty-two in the Fifty-fifth Congress (1897-1899), and dropped to nine in the Fifty-seventh Congress (1901-1903). Clanton does not consider their committee work; instead, he focuses on what they said daily on the floors of the house and senate as though he "was sitting in the galleries" (p. 27).

A long time student of Populism, Clanton's work began with *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (1969) and includes a short history of the movement, *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890-1900* (1991). All of his work has taken issue with the vision of Populism that Richard Hofstadter advanced in *The Age of Reform* (1955), a vision that emphasized reactionary strains in the movement like a conspiratorial view of history and anti-Semitism. Hofstadter maintained, moreover, that Populism represented a style of politics that later found expression in a variety of twentieth-century movements. More recently, Michael Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion* (1995) argued that Populism reflected a rhetorical style that manifested itself in spokesmen like Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s and Governor George Wallace in the 1960s.

In contrast to Hofstadter and Kazin, Clanton limits his work to people who joined the People's party in the 1890s. That was a pivotal decade that saw the triumph of corporate capitalism and imperialism. The Populists opposed those movements. They reflected an older form of American radicalism, Clanton argues, that rested on the republican vision that arose in the American Revolution, that found its classic expression in the writings of Thomas Jefferson, and that underlay a variety of farmer and labor movements over the course of the nineteenth century. Populism represented the old radicalism's final expression. The Populists, Clanton believes, wanted to see the nation return to its fundamental democratic principles that would give people "priority over...impersonal market forces" (p. 19). For farmers, the People's Party called for reforms in the nation's monetary and transportation systems and in the way the federal government disposed of public lands. But the Populists also had programs for those who lived in the nation's towns and cities—a graduated income tax, an eight hour work day, ending the Pinkerton system of strike breaking, and the broadening of democracy through the initiative, the referendum, and the direct election of senators. In short, Clanton presents Populism as an indigenous, grass roots movement that offered an important alternative for the nation at the close of the nineteenth century. While strains of Populism would appear in later reform move-

ments, like the New Deal, it did not have a lot in common with twentieth-century liberalism. The programs of presidents like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt found corporate capitalism more acceptable than had the Populists.

The current study reinforces the interpretation that Clanton advanced in his earlier works. For the most part, the Populist representatives and senators stuck to their party's principles and left a record that stands well a century later. They called for a flexible currency at a time when the gold standard contributed to deflation that harmed many people; worked for lowering tariff rates and implementing a graduated income tax; urged the federal government to sponsor public works programs to relieve the depression in the 1890s; consistently supported the nationalization of railroads; called for United States intervention in Cuba to end Spanish rule but opposed the acquisition of the Philippines; and spoke out against the disfranchisement of blacks and poor whites in the South.

Without Clanton's careful work, one could misunderstand the Congressional Populists. They supported immigration restriction, for example, but they did not side with those who for racist reasons wanted to halt immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Instead, the Populists favored immigration restriction, without reference to national origins, to protect the jobs of American workers. On the issue of fiscal conservatism, to cite another example, some might conclude that the Populists were "anti-state conservatives" (p. 38) who wanted to restrict the role of the federal government to a minimum. While Populist congressmen warned against needless federal spending, they also supported an array of programs that called for the government to play a far more active role in the nation's affairs.

Clanton certainly gives the congressional Populist their due, but his study could be stronger in a number of areas. He gives insight into the careers and person-

alities of leaders like Jerry Simpson, Tom Watson, and Marion Butler, but he tells little about most of the men who represented the People's party in Congress. Curtis Castle, a Populist who represented California in the Fifty-fifth Congress, appears to have been an intriguing person, but we get only a fleeting glance of some of his remarks. Unfortunately, this is true for most of the congressional Populists. Additionally, Clanton could have done more in distinguishing between the Populists who were strongly committed to their party and those who won on fusion tickets and who maintained close ties to the Democratic and Republican parties. Populists who won on fusion tickets played a stronger role after 1896, and their presence may have weakened the reform thrust of the Populist congressional delegation. Finally, while Clanton had to include the remarks of Democrats and Republicans in order to help readers better understand what the Populists represented, he sometimes overdid this. Readers may wonder, for example, why John Fitzgerald got as much attention as he did. Was it because this Massachusetts Democrat was the grandfather of President John F. Kennedy?

The criticisms mentioned above do not seriously weaken Clanton's work. By addressing a previously neglected aspect of Populism, this book advances understanding of the movement. While some of the Populist congressmen occasionally strayed from their party's principles, for the most part these third party representatives offered an alternative to the major parties. They spoke for the interest of small producers at a time in the nation's history when the new corporate order triumphed. Clanton's book increases awareness of what the People's party and its leaders represented.

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