

Mary Jo Buhle, Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), excerpt

Women's position in Populism had been prepared by decades of participation in agrarian movements, particularly the Patrons of Husbandry. Organized in the late 1860s as a secret society devoted to cooperation, the Grange invested womanhood with a mystical significance rooted in ancient lore. The founders described the Eleusinian mysteries wherein male and female cult members worshipped the goddess of agriculture, Ceres. Modern-day Grangers continued to revere women. 'Like a bright star in the dark pathway of life,' as a Minnesota Worthy Master said to a Grange convention in 1879, woman guided human existence, her 'purity, tenderness and delicacy' an inspiration for the Patrons of Husbandry. Support for her cause 'more than all else,' he added, was destined to 'make our Order live forever.'

On a more mundane level, Grangers considered women a necessary element in rural association. Because the Grange emphasized the unity of the family, women served jointly with their husbands. A local assembly, for example, could acquire a charter only by demonstrating that at least four women as well as nine men were ready to enroll. Women possessed full voting rights, had access to any office, and enjoyed special posts created for women's affairs. In a majority of assemblies the lecturer who directed its programs was female, as were the leading officials of several state organizations. At picnics, processions, banquets, concerts, and other social events, women took the more familiar role of preparing refreshments and caring for children. Often relegated to positions of nominal equality, especially in southern assemblies, women gained at the minimum a sense of participation comparable to that of German-American women in the Socialist fraternal network. But in many Midwestern Grange chapters women shaped the social character of local institutions along more egalitarian lines and won support for both temperance and woman suffrage campaigns.

In its first years the Grange served to strengthen the western woman's movement. By the mid-1870s, when the organization had grown to nearly 25,000 chapters and three-quarters of a million members, its geographical center was the Ohio River Valley and adjoining states where the WCTU gained its first ground. The temperance crusade profited directly as the Patrons of Husbandry placed itself squarely on the side of the WCTU. The Grange required a vow of abstinence for admission and included temperance instruction in its ritual. In Ohio, home of the woman's crusade, the first links between the Grange and the WCTU were established. While the state Grange met in Xenia, woman's crusaders struck at a local tavern and forced the owner of the 'Shades of Death' to empty his kegs. The Grange voted unanimously to join the ceremony, the State Master delivering a temperance speech atop the empty whiskey barrel. The sentiment spread rapidly among Grangers, pushed to such an extreme that the Illinois order officially condemned the use of tobacco as well as spirits. WCTU activists could find among their Grange friends across the Midwest and Plains states ready listeners and collaborators in their sacred vigil."

The Grange also became a force for woman suffrage. As early as 1876 one Granger predicted that their assemblies would 'prove a more powerful organization for the inauguration of Woman Suffrage than even the Woman Suffrage organizations themselves.'" In western Kansas some of the ablest lecturers routinely presented woman suffrage arguments; one claimed that the 'nation's safety lies in the political advancement of Woman.'" The southern sector obstructed any uniform position until 1885, when at a national convention the Patrons of Husbandry finally passed a resolution recognizing the equality of the sexes as one of the order's cardinal principles. Grangers avowed they were 'therefore prepared to hail with delight, any advancement of the legal status of woman, which may give to her the full rights of the ballot box, and an equal condition of citizenship. Grangers subsequently reaffirmed this policy, blessed the WCTU for its salvational roles, and established a special committee to accelerate programs on women's behalf. Admittedly the southern delegates continued to harbor more conservative opinions, and committee work often relegated women to traditional pastimes, such as kitchen duty. Despite these limitations, many women used their Grange

experiences to prepare for wider political roles. Some rank-and-file women actually became locally notorious in the 1880s when they initiated the first discussions of the forbidden political issues. During the severe rural recession of 1887-88, when the political taboo became impossible to enforce, women in states ranging from Texas to Michigan, Minnesota, and Nebraska to Colorado and California rallied to the banner of Populism."

Although the most militant sector of the Populist movement at large originated among farmers in the South and Southwest, it was not surprising that women organized as a distinct force where they had struck the deepest roots. True to its woman's rights heritage stretching back to the bloody strife of the 1850s, the historic woman suffrage campaign of 1867, and the early temperance victories, Kansas became the organizational epicenter for Populist women. Residents of the state's growing commercial centers, urban women likewise found an opportunity to participate in a far-flung movement not merely agrarian---contrary to belief common at the time and since-but profoundly radical.

The most prominent Populist women-Fanny Randolph Vickery, Marion Todd, Sarah Emery, Mary E. Lease, and Annie Diggs-had gained their spurs in a variety of antimonopolist movements foreshadowing Populism. Significantly, none had been a lifelong resident of a farm. Mary E. Lease, for example, before calling upon farmers to raise less corn and more hell, lived as a housewife in Wichita, where she cared for her family, handled the usual household chores, and took in laundry to supplement the family budget; her first political act upon moving to Wichita had been the organization of a women's discussion club. Women like Lease displayed an acute awareness of the plight of the urban working class, particularly its female component. They typically had helped organize institutions for workingwomen and often joined the Knights of Labor in recognition of its pledge to equal wages for equal work. Observing the intensification of urban woes most especially among women fresh off the farm, these experienced activists felt a strong kinship with their rural sisters and served as their voice within the movement's leadership."

Populist women in cities or on farms shared a common aspiration. Transcending all differences was foremost a universal commitment to women's enfranchisement that found its ideological and organizational base for women of varying backgrounds within the WCTU. Annie Diggs, for example, had begun her career in Lawrence, Kansas, as a pollwatcher in a prohibitionist campaign, later to become vice-president of the state suffrage organization. Sarah Emery, known as the 'Elizabeth Cady Stanton of the Michigan Home Crusade,' served as national superintendent of the WCTU's department on temperance and labor. Mary E. Lease claimed a half-million "white-ribboners" in the Populist ranks, and WCTU officials reciprocated, blessing the Farmers' Alliance as a major temperance ally in the struggle to abolish the liquor traffic and unearned wealth." This sense of shared perceptions created an ideological continuity, from the WCTU to Populism, almost precisely parallel to that between the urban-based woman's movement and Nationalism. Women had moved in their own ways from self-interested causes to broader radical concerns.

Populist ideology reflected vividly the sentiments put forth by the WCTU, especially as thousands of alliance women helped revive the struggle for temperance and woman suffrage in the late 1880s. But even more as symbols, temperance and woman suffrage conveyed the special significance the WCTU had invested in the concept of womanhood. The rhetoric of Populism alone was testimony to this fact. Womanhood embodied, as Grangers had likewise insisted, the moral imperative against evil.

If Nationalist women found their desires expressed in *Looking Backward*, Populist women located their own literary idol in master politician Ignatius Donnelly, whose sequel to the famous *Caesar's Column* (1890) tells the story of the reconstruction of a new order along feminine lines. *The Golden Bottle* (1892) incorporated the popular faith in the power of womanhood to purify the civilization and to guide the entire process of reconstruction. The great struggle is led in unison by two characters, Ephraim Benezet and his wife, Sophie. Ephraim, a Plains state lad who discovers a liquid that turns base metals into gold, uses his rapidly accumulating fortune to secure a place for himself as reform demagogue, finally to become president of the United States. From his

position Ephraim directs a worldwide revolution. In weaving this tale, Donnelly suggests only a faint blueprint of the future political order but provides massive details on how the revolutionary struggle is to be waged. He exalts the concept of womanhood as symbol of morality and political wisdom.

In many respects it is not Ephraim but Sophie who emerges as the major protagonist. After a close call with the ultimate degradation brought about by a forced move to the city, Sophie is awakened at a tender age to the reality of women's powerlessness and sagely turns to political action. She first organizes the women of Omaha into a grand sisterhood. She speaks to the middle-class women and explains the horrible plight of farm families, the desperation which allowed farm parents to send their daughters off to the cities in search of work. The family, Sophie explains, was being destroyed, crushed under the tolling rock, the Sisyphine weight of interests, of taxes, of monopolized markets, of cruel trusts, of every form of human selfishness and cunning. 'The poor country girl is thus driven into the "great wicked city" to find work or to perish. But even if she does find work, it is usually of some unhealthy type paying only starvation wages. This girl, Sophie explains further, 'becomes a merciless hunter of men, armed with the poison darts of disease and death' as she turns to the only good-paying occupation available. Having moved her audience to tears, Sophie pleads with these women to recognize their duty to their sisters and to aid them in some substantial way.'

The women of Omaha form the Woman's Cooperative Association, a self-help society gathering both middle- and working-class women and spreading to every ward of the city. The association erects a splendid building to house workingwomen, to provide fine reading and music rooms as well as large halls for dancing and lectures. These establishments were, Sophie remarks, 'little paradises on earth.'" The project succeeds so well that the workingwomen are uplifted from their abject misery and the entire city is transformed into a pure and moral place.

Sophie then builds upon her initial success and forms a national society, the Woman's League of America, which pledges to buy no goods made by women except from women themselves. Then the 'race rose with the elevation of the *matrix* of the race; for the river of humanity cannot ascend above the level of its fountain-woman.... The earth became beautiful, peaceful, happy, hopeful; full of all kindness and goodness.' Rich women were released from enforced idleness and dissipation and walked hand in hand with their sisters of one blood.' The solution was 'Not charity, but justice. Not stealing from the poor and giving them back part of it, with many airs and flourishes and ostentation; but stopping the stealing, and *permitting industry to keep the fruits of its own toil.*

As the quintessential Populist novel of social reconstruction, *The Golden Bottle* focuses clearly on woman's role in transforming the industrial order into the Cooperative-Commonwealth. There is, notably, no nostalgia for the pre-industrial past, no backward glance at domesticity. Rather the inequities and degradation of modern life are met head on, their eradication premised upon a collective solution to economic problems with women taking a major part in the effort. At the conclusion of the novel, a grand finale indeed, the readers follow Sophie's triumph as, mounted on a white horse, she gallops across the Russian steppes leading the masses out from under czarist oppression and darkness, completing the last chapter in the revolutionary purification of the world.

Behind the gripping action of Donnelly's tale, his depiction of womanhood has a ring of familiarity. Like Bellamy, he drew on the sentiments of his milieu and rendered them a literary device of far-reaching significance. As in the case of *Looking Backward*, *The Golden Bottle* owed much of its popularity to the seedwork of the woman's movement in creating a female audience eager to accept its political message. At rank-and-file levels the positive images of womanhood which women leaders put forward and Donnelly converted into a literary metaphor became Populist icons.

This praise of women's role could prove deceptive in certain respects, for women did not share leadership or gain a consistent leverage region by region. The Farmers' Alliance and its electoral arm, the People's party, did not provide women with as much organizational space as did the Grange. Whereas the

Grange viewed itself as a cooperative and fraternal order, Populism spread like wildfire as a protest movement. Cooperative marketing, widespread agitation, and electoral activity directed against the railroads and other monopolies launched the agrarian movement almost overnight as a major regional political force. By 1890 the alliance appeared to many observers to lack only urban allies in its campaign to take control of American society. But a price had been paid, better understood by women than by their brother comrades. The family-based and socially oriented activities familiar to the Grange had given way to an apparatus more like that of a traditional political movement. Populists abandoned the dual representation of men and women in its internal offices, jettisoned much of the elaborate ceremony that ensured women's centrality, and relegated voteless women to an ancillary role. "

Yet women re-emerged near the movement's center by virtue of their energy and self-organization, the authority they wielded as wives and mothers, and the ideological position they gained in the Populist articles of faith. At the local level especially, individual women participated as chapter secretaries, stump speakers, newspaper writers, and editors. As groups they inevitably took in hand the social services that kept the movement alive and thriving. Like the German- American Socialists' summer outings but larger and more dramatic, massive tent meetings reached across the southern and western states in the late 1880s, adapted both from the educational Chautauqua meetings and from the reviv- alist gatherings common to the region. Through their own initiatives in the national organization and with the hope of forging a far-reaching political alliance, Populist women pushed the movement to its limits.

Especially in states where women were well organized, Populist agitators could turn their demands for the ballot and equal wages into a wider program. Writers in the local and regional press thus hammered away at the fact that woman's sphere was not, properly speaking, the home. The movement's female base was, of course, the 'farmer's wife,' and the primary description of the home still reigned as the 'sacred refuge of our life.'" But essayists frequently addressed the largest fact of rural domestic existence: drudgery. They commonly implored women to resist the temptation of excessive cleanliness and order, to let their household chores slip by the wayside if necessary, and to make more time for themselves and their loved ones. Ordinary Populist women developed their own strategy along lines paralleling the cooperative politics of the Grange and the Farmers' Alliance: the cooperative household. With home care shared systematically by all family members, they argued, women would be freed from their bonds and capable of doing anything they chose. As one woman wrote, 'Some people think it is acutely funny if a woman anywhere is not devotedly attached to making biscuits and darning socks. And yet **men** have been known who preferred other occupations to plowing and cleaning sewers, and no one seemed to think they were monstrosities.'"

Years of devotion in the WCTU had, necessarily, instilled in Populist women a great respect for women's traditional roles, but they affirmed the goodness of woman innate to herself rather than to her current drudgery. The fate of civilization rested in the hands of those who had gained moral sensibility as guardians of the family, they believed. But to exercise that power, women had to be housewives. Thus Bettie Gay gave a Populist gloss to the sentiment the WCTU had done so much to make popular:

What we need, above all things else, is a better womanhood, a womanhood with the courage of conviction, armed with intelligence and the great- est virtues of her sex, acknowledging no master and accepting no compromise. When her enemies shall have laid down their arms, and her proper position in society is recognized, she will be prepared to take upon herself the responsibilities of life, and civilization will be advanced to that point where intellect instead of brute force will rule the world. When this work is accomplished, avarice, greed, and passion will cease to control the minds of the people, and we can proclaim, 'Peace on earth, good will toward men.'"

Much like their sisters in other sectors of the :Oman's movement, Populist women named men's political hegemony as a major cause of civilization's decline. Only as women assumed their rights would the republic return to its proper course.

So well entrenched in the philosophy of the woman's movement and committed to women's

prerogatives, Populist women sought alliances with other women reformers. They dispatched delegates to suffrage conventions, to WCTU meetings, and to the National and International Councils of Women. In 1890 a group of Topeka, Kansas, women took a portentous step further. They established a newspaper with the expressed purpose of fostering a new, national women's reform coalition. The monthly *Farmers Wife*, emblazoned with the time-tested motto 'Equal Rights to All, Special Privileges to None,' urged women to communicate with one another and to promote the 'natural unity' of temperance, suffrage, labor, and agrarian radicalism.

In September, 1891, Populist women founded the National Woman's Alliance with presiding officers Fannie McCormick, a Kansas 'foreman' in the Knights of Labor, and Emrna D. Pack, *Farmers Wife* editor and honored women's club leader in Topeka. Women in twenty-six states served as vice-presidents, and the adopted charter carried the signatures of Annie Diggs, Mary E. Lease, Sarah Emery, Marion Todd, and other leading Populist women. The 'Declaration of Purposes,' a representative document of Gilded Age woman's reform, read:

In view of the great social, industrial, and financial revolution now dawning upon the civilized world, and the universal demand of all classes of our American citizens for equal rights and privileges in every vocation of human life, we, the industrial women of America, declare our purposes in the formation of this organization as follows, viz.:

1st. To study all questions relating to the structure of human society, in the full light of modern invention, discovery and thought.

2d. To carry out into practical life the precepts of the golden rule.

3d. To recognize the full political equality of the sexes.

4th. To aid in carrying out the principle of co-operation in every department of human life to its fullest extent.

5th. To secure the utmost harmony and unity of action among the Sisterhood, in all sections of our country.

6th. To teach the principles of international arbitration, and if possible, to prevent war.

7th. To discourage in every way possible the use of all alcoholic liquors as a beverage, or the habitual use of tobacco or other narcotics injurious to the human System. 116

The thirst for enlightenment, the demand for equal political rights, and the faith in women's regenerative power rendered the Woman's Alliance the logical successor to the WCTU and women's clubs. Far from the rural paranoia often attributed to Populists, the *Farmers Wife*, as official organ of the National Woman's Alliance, carried column upon column of news and encouragement from countryside and urban areas alike. The federated plan of organization accommodated various possible models, from the Illinois Woman's Alliance that the paper publicized, to the Woman's Christian Alliance of Lufkin, Texas, which was launched after an alliance organizer toured the area. "

The success of the National Woman's Alliance would depend upon a favorable response from allies in the urban woman's movement and from the Populist leadership itself. Organizers therefore asked Populist politicians to lend their official endorsement to woman suffrage and to women's rights as laborers. They asked, too, for statements of encouragement. Pungent epigrams in the *Farmers Wife* expressed better than any theoretical treatise the weight Populist women placed upon a positive response:

Give our women encouragement and victory is yours. Be as true to the women as they are to you. Don't give us taffy; we are too old for that.

Give the women a suffrage plank: you may have the rest.

Rule the women out and the reform movement is a dead letter. Put our women lecturers in the field and revolution is here. "

This buoyant sentiment fed expectations of cataclysmic change, no less for women than for men. The

Populist political momentum, gaining steadily since the late 1880s, seemed to need only an urban counterpart to become the major force in the nation. That necessity required in turn the kind of alliance women prided themselves in having pioneered and which could evidently become whole only through their participation.

The women who rose to prominence in the major radical movements of the late 1880s and early 1890s--in the 'Americanized' sections of the Socialist Labor party, Bellamy Nationalism, and the Farmers' Alliance--carried with them certain articles of faith from earlier involvements. They clung to a romantic notion of womanhood expansive enough to encompass a vision of women organized as the ultimate force against corruption. As principal organizers, renowned orators, or activists of regional standing, women began to seek alliances with various elements of the nascent protest movement, and they endowed this new endeavor with distinctive qualities transferred from their own organizations. Decades of preparation in the independent woman's movement had firmed their faith. As Mary E. Lease announced at the peak of the People's party campaign in 1892: 'Thank God we women are blameless for this political muddle you men have dragged us into.... Ours is a grand and holy mission, a mission as high and holy as ever inspired the heart, fired the brain, or nerved the sinew ... ours the mission to drive from our land and forever abolish the triune monopoly of land, monopoly, and transportation. Ours is the mission to place the mothers of this nation on an equality with the fathers. . . .'" Women's accession to political and economic power was, in this perspective, not merely a desirable goal but the prerequisite for the establishment of the Cooperative Commonwealth.