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**Who Were the Populists?**  
**A Few Thoughts On Bill Moyers' Speech,**  
**"This is Your Story -- The Progressive Story of America. Pass It On."**  
**delivered at the Take Back America Conference, Washington DC, 11 June 2003**  
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I cannot do justice here to the false assumptions, half-truths, distortions and manipulations upon which Moyers' speech is constructed. Adrienne Rich has written that we cannot understand ourselves unless we understand the assumptions in which we are all "drenched." Can it be any different for a nation?

Moyers devotes only a few lines to the Constitution and the Founding Fathers -- saying nothing about what these Fathers designed the nation's plan of governance to be, to do. He does declare that "for all the rhetoric about 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,' it took a civil war to free the slaves and another hundred years to invest their freedom with meaning. Women only gained the right to vote in my mother's time. New ages don't arrive overnight, or without 'blood, sweat and tears.' You know this."

All true. But Moyers does not explain *why* it has been extraordinarily difficult for *the majority* to bring about changes in fundamental **rights**; *why* it has been difficult for *the majority to govern*.

This is because people organizing for rights, seeking to define the nation's money, work and commerce, seeking to build institutions and mechanisms of governance, and trying to have a real say in deciding war and peace, always ran smack into the minority controlling the law of the land . . . into a minority directing the armed might of the nation.

This is the governing system the Founders' Constitution put in place.

People organizing to stop war, close the School of the Americas, redefine the CIA, save forest ecosystems, curb factory farms, resist corporate toxic poisoning, regulate corporate activities in elections and legislatures, etc., find the "law of the land" arrayed against them. They find the "law of the land" supporting corporate privilege while repressing people organizing to stop corporate assaults and denials of rights.

Moyers' history tells us that the "norm" for sane and logical societal change -- for shifting the force of government and law from the oppressors to the oppressed -- is generations and generations of struggle. Don't worry about the structure of governance -- keep doing what you've been doing. No need to rethink history or law -- do more of the same . . . just try harder.

And by lumping Populism with Progressivism, by extolling the Progressive Era's legacy of regulatory and administrative law, he joins countless 20th century leaders and historians in denying the Populist Movement. What they all work so hard to deny, alas, is the largest democratic mass movement in US history, a massing devoted to building upon the trampled ideals of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence.

Populists were farmers, workers and like-minded intellectuals challenging usurpations galore declared lawful by men of property. Populists had no interest in regulating destructive and rights-denying corporate behaviors. Daring to trust their own experiences with banking, railroad, grain, land, insurance, and manufacturing magnates (and their corporations), they had no illusions that permitting and disclosure -- the basis of "progressive" regulation -- would fix a corporate state.

"Heretics in a land of true believers and recent converts," Populists had seen "the coming society and they did not like it." [1]

Their goal was to end special privilege, make all institutions democratic, render all corporate entities subordinate, replace competition with cooperation. They came to understand that for the American people to own and control not only their own labor but also the money system and all necessities of life, they would have to gain authority over the mechanisms of governance.

To do this, they realized they would have to change the country's minority rule Constitution.

Men of property (such as Mark Hanna) who joined to crush the nation's largest democratic mass movement named the post-Populist era as "Progressive." Yet the years 1900-1920 saw increasing economic concentration, a resurgence in white supremacy and denial of African American and Native People's rights, a new militant patriotism targeting immigrants and rationalizing violent imperial expeditions, massive assaults upon workers and unions. The misnamed Progressive Era helped destroy the historical memory of "the egalitarian current that was part of the nation's wellspring." [2] It drove serious thought and debate about restructuring banking, manufacturing and agriculture, about the nature of the corporation itself, outside the realm of the "rational" -- and far off the public agenda.

Until WWI, a few organizing campaigns (by Wobblies, for example) were still about challenging usurpations (a word, by the way, most people understood to mean illegitimate seizure of public governing authority by private forces) and demanding rights. But what Populists saw as usurping, Progressives and their heirs embraced as efficient and productive. Historian Lawrence Goodwyn:

The economic, political, and moral authority that 'concentrated capital' was able to mobilize in 1896 generated a cultural momentum that gathered in intensity until it created new political guidelines for the entire society in 20th century America. . . . After McKinley's impressive victory in 1896, these patterns become fully consolidated within the new generation of the Progressive era and proved adequate during a brief time of further testing during the New Deal. They have remained substantially unquestioned since, and broadly describe the limits of national politics in the second half of the 20th century. . . . The narrowed boundaries of modern politics that date from the 1896 campaign encircle such influential areas of American life as the relationship of corporate power to citizen power, the political language legitimized to define and settle public issues within a mass society yoked to privately owned communications and to

privately financed elections . . . In the aggregate, these boundaries outline a clear retreat from the democratic vistas of either the 18th century Jeffersonians or the 19th century Populists.[3]

Moyers declines to finger the Progressive Era as a time when propertied elites mobilized pre-emptively for limited reforms; when the giant corporation solidified its grip as the dominant institution -- the only source of progress, jobs, liberty, efficiency and security. It was a time when our culture embraced a corporate *system* as both ideal and inevitable.

Ever since, this corporate system has channeled civic activism into relentless regulatory energy sinks. In those disabling political arenas, the most that even *majorities* of people could accomplish was to make corporate behaviors a little less destructive and oppressive. There would be no discussions about first principles, about self-governance, about ideals . . . about which parts of the Constitution are the people's and which belong to the corporate class.

It snowballed from there. The New Deal picked up not the Populist perspective and agenda but Progressive diversions. [ 4 ] Post-WWII liberals limited their aspirations to making corporate capitalism plus global imperialism a little less bad . . . and denied realities galore. No wonder Clinton and Gore helped corporate managers drive their nonsense even deeper into law and culture.

Every paragraph of Moyers' speech is diversion-city. I will limit myself here to one last point: towards the end, Moyers speaks of what happened in the 1960s and 1970s. I'll pass over silliness like Democrats "went too far too fast, overreached at home and in Vietnam . . ." and go right to the heart:

The failure of Democratic politicians and public thinkers to respond to popular discontents . . . allowed a resurgent conservatism to convert public concern and opinion into a crusade to resurrect social Darwinism as a moral philosophy, multinational corporations as a governing class, and the theology of markets as a transcendental belief system.

This is nonsense. The "failure" he speaks of began with the Constitution -- a plan of governance written by a few to deny rights to the many. This failure was sustained by slavemasters North and South. It was privileged by the structures of governance set up by the Constitution; was rejuvenated by the merging of "defeated" slaveocracy with emerging northern capital to end Reconstruction -- the killing of what DuBois called the "Second American Revolution." It was advanced by government plus corporate leaders wielding "the law" and large-scale violence vs. small farmers, workers, Socialists, Anarchists, Greenbackers, African Americans, Native Peoples, women, sex educators, free lovers, Wobblies, and others mobilizing not only for "rights," but also to turn their values and visions into public policy. The "failure" was deepened by colonialism and imperialism, by great world wars . . .

(And is Moyers suggesting that global corporations were **not** acting as the governing class during the 1940s and 1950s?)

All to say: Populism was the last people's movement which told the truth about past and present -- told the truth about the present in order to unlock the past; unlocked the past in order to see the truth about the present. Populism was not about ending "corruption" or "excess." It was about ending private governance which had been the rule -- private

governance first by a slave owning class, and then by a corporate class. It was about stopping **public officials** from using law and armed force to enable the few to deny the many. So the reason a "resurgent conservatism" in the late 1970s galloped so quickly and successfully was that the New Deal, and then the Fair Deal -- along with post WWII liberal theology and civic organizing -- did not contest the corporate class' authority to use the law of the land to govern.

The two Deals did not set out to strip men of property and their corporations of the illegitimate privileges and constitutional powers they had seized from the Revolution on. They did not *talk* about such matters. Those who dared to raise such issues were disappeared during the great corporate+government redscare years.

The New Deal and Fair Deal and New Frontier and the Great Society changed many people's lives for the better. But they left the history, language and constitutional doctrines of minority rule -- and the institutions of minority rule -- intact. They did not provide succeeding generations with tools to see or to confront the greatest concentration of wealth and power of all time.

Year after year, corporate operatives drove their wealth and power into the Constitution, into state corporation laws, into building corporate and government institutions of propaganda, persuasion and coercion. Year after year, they enriched a corporate class under color of law. Year after year, liberals and progressives poured their energies into resisting assaults one at a time over and over again . . . splintering into single issue groups easily channeled into one-struggle-at-a-time, few of which were about "rights," and most of which promoted false histories, polluted language and glorified seriously-compromised victories.

A quarter century after a great anti-nuke-safe energy movement stopped 850 nuclear plants, why is the nation no closer to a solar transition? For how many decades have large numbers of dedicated, well-organized people been trying to "protect" family farms? To set in motion sane transitions in every industry, from health care to food, to media to transportation to forestry to mining to banking? Why have activist "victories" provided few tools to challenge the illegitimate power and authority which corporate managers wield against people, communities and the natural world? Why was it so easy for the Bush government to invade Iraq in the face of massive, well-organized and visible opposition in the US?

Moyers' history says to activists: you've got the correct understanding of the past, embrace it, the USA is a democracy, you've been doing all the right things; keep marshaling information and organizing and trying to enforce the laws progressives and liberals have already passed. And just accept that for every single issue you are working on, the best you can do is make the problem a little less bad . . . and it will take you 50 years to accomplish some compromise you can then celebrate as victory. There is no alternative.

He does not help people today understand that "Once defeated, [Populists] lost what cultural autonomy they had amassed and surrendered their progeny to the training camps of the conquering army."<sup>[5]</sup>

Many folks harbor dreams and visions of a nation characterized by democratic self-governance, no special privilege, and public officials dedicated to nurturing democratic

institutions and democratic processes. **But We the People can't get there from Moyers' tall tales.**

Today, growing numbers (not limited to old lefties and graying hippies) are realizing that Progressive-New Deal-liberal explanations do not help people understand what's going on today in this country. As cosmologist Thomas Berry has written: "The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of the present situation." [6]

## Footnotes

1. Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 320.  
[See (PDF) excerpts from the Introduction to this book presented in "Session VI - People's and Workers' Resistance Movements" one of ten study group packets from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign: Challenging Corporate Power, Asserting the People's Rights and the Abolishing Corporate Personhood. "The objectives of the study groups are: (1) to frame learning and discussion in ways that focus on the root causes of corporate and state oppression, and (2) to direct efforts for change in law and culture toward those public officials and public bodies that must take the authority to place economic institutions and all corporate entities under the control of a self-governing people." --rator]
2. Goodwyn, p. 319
3. Goodwyn, pp. 264-5
4. "In many ways, land centralization in American agriculture was a decades-long product of farm credit policies acceptable to the American banking community. The victory won by the goldbugs in the 1890s [that is, won by corporate leaders inside and outside government --rg] thus was consolidated by the New Deal reforms. These policies had the twin effects of sanctioning peonage and penalizing family farmers. The end result was a loss of autonomy by millions of Americans on the land." - Goodwyn, p. 269
5. Goodwyn, p. 320
6. Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, 1988  
[*Dream of the Earth* is Berry's first book outlining his understanding of the universe as the primary revelation of God. Berry, a Passionist priest trained as a cultural historian -- he calls himself a "geologian" which emphasises his lifelong commitment to the study of the earth -- touches on various aspects of the earth's dreams and the demands those dreams place on us. He avoids the impasse of positing the spiritual other-worldly religious community on the one hand and the physical meaninglessness of the scientific community on the other by making the cosmos humanity's most fundamental concern. A sampling of quotes from the book:
  - "If the earth does grow inhospitable toward human presence, it is primarily because we have lost our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality."
  - "The natural world is the maternal source of our being as earthlings and the life-giving nourishment of our physical, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and religious existence. The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong. To be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. To damage this community is to diminish our own existence."
  - "This is a sense of presence, a realization that the earth community is a wilderness community that will not be bargained with; nor will it simply be studied or examined or made an object of any kind; nor will it be domesticated or trivialized as a setting for vacation indulgence, except under duress and by oppressions which it cannot escape."
  - "Finally we begin to recover a reverence for the material out of which we were born, for the nourishing context that sustains us, the sounds and scenery, the warmth of the wind and the coolness of the water -- all of which delight us and purify us and communicate to us some sense of sacred presence."
  - "The ecological age fosters the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe. There is an awe and reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun, and all heavenly bodies; to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forests and the birds of the air. To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice. Our primary need for the various lifeforms of the planet is a psychic, rather than a physical, need."

--rator]

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