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Review of *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian
Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892*
by Jeffrey Ostler

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Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892. Jeffrey Ostler. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. xii+256 pp. Maps, tables, endnotes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0-7006-0606-8).

Why was there no populism in Iowa? That is the question posed by Jeffrey Ostler, assistant professor of history at the University of Oregon, in this revised version of his dissertation. The question itself is more complicated than it might first seem, and Ostler's thoughtful and carefully-researched answers have interesting implications for the study of late 19th-century politics more generally.

Ostler approaches his question by comparing Iowa with Kansas and Nebraska. Arguing that the economic situation of farmers in the three states was not sufficiently different to explain the great dissimilarity in their support for the Populist Party in the 1890s, he demonstrates that the Farmers' Alliance developed comparable levels of strength in all three states. The key differences, he maintains, are to be found instead within the system of party politics within each state and the reception that the Alliance found in each state for its proposals.

In Iowa, cooperation in the early 1880s between Democrats and green-back-antimonopoly groups produced a system of two-party competition such that both parties proved receptive to proposals from the Farmer's Alliance. The Alliance, as a result, secured state legislation in 1888 that regulated railroads. In Kansas and Nebraska, by contrast, the Republican party

was so securely in control that it ignored the Alliance. This pushed Alliance members in those states both toward a more radical analysis of the political economy and toward action outside the two-party system. In Iowa, however, the Alliance settled into the role of an organized interest group, never moved beyond a reformist stance, and discouraged third-party politics.

The crucial difference, Ostler argues, was the nature of the state party system, and especially the extent of inter-party competition. Thus, he concludes, “third-party formation in Kansas and Nebraska was related to the failure of state-level reform,” but “the failure of populism in Iowa was closely linked to the Iowa Alliance’s successful campaign for railroad reform in 1888” (p. 134).

Ostler widens his focus beyond state agrarian politics to the nature of politics in a federal system. He begins by quoting James Madison, in *The Federalist No. 10*, on the advantage of a federal republic for containing “a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project.” Given the experience of the Alliance in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, Ostler draws the conclusion that the failure of populism did not indicate “a lack of fuel for such a fire” but instead illustrates the way that “a vast, decentralized republic” could control a potential political conflagration (p. 11).

My only major criticism is that I am not fully persuaded that Iowa farmers faced economic difficulties comparable to those confronting farmers in central Nebraska and Kansas. Regardless of that, however, Ostler has demonstrated important elements for understanding the behavior of Alliance leaders in the three states. Furthermore, his emphasis on the significance of quite different systems of party competition in similar states has important implications not only for the study of Populism but for understanding late 19th-century and early 20th-century politics more generally. **Robert W. Cherny**, *Department of History, San Francisco State University*.