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October 1996

## Review of *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics* by Peter H. Argersinger

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McNall, Scott G., "Review of *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics* by Peter H. Argersinger" (1996). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 302.  
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**The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism: Western Populism and American Politics.** Peter H. Argersinger. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. x+302 pp. References, notes, and index. \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0-7006-0702-1).

Peter Argersinger is one of the best known and influential writers on American Populism. His clear, well-crafted pieces on the origins and eventual demise of the Populist movement are outstanding in their ability to help

contemporary readers understand the turmoil and complexity of late nineteenth-century American politics. Those familiar with his writing will find *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism* a compilation of previous work spanning a quarter century of scholarly effort with an entirely new chapter as a bonus. My personal favorite, "Road to a Republican Waterloo," explains why a third party farmer's movement triumphed over a well-entrenched Republican party in the Kansas election of 1890.

As Argersinger recounts the story of the nation's greatest mass democratic movement, Populism arose out of the economic cycles of boom and bust that characterized American agriculture in the late nineteenth century. (Explanations for the rise of Southern Populism, not the subject of this work, are somewhat different.) American farmers, coming together in Grange Halls, churches, and school houses, spoke of the death of the Jeffersonian dream of small holders rewarded for their hard work. They saw others getting rich at their expense (grain dealers, railroad stockholders) and demanded change. They mounted no real arguments against capitalism, but defended the interests of producers and workers against economic parasites, large corporations, and an indifferent market sucking their blood dry. As believers in a democratic system, they turned to the political arena for relief, only to find opportunities for reform blocked by corrupt politicians in the pay of their enemies. En masse, they cried out for change, for a redemption of the political and economic system. Combining economic, political, and religious language, some argued that Populism was "the voice of God preparing the people for the coming of Christ's Kingdom. . . ."

Mobilizing rapidly, and building on old reform movements, Populism swept onto the political stage. But farmers and, for a brief moment, their working-class allies just as rapidly exited. Cheated and discouraged, checked at every point by the dominant parties, their fervor was finally snuffed out when Bryan stood as the farmer's compromise standard bearer against McKinley in the election of 1896. It was extremely difficult for the Populists to make the transition from a mass movement to a political party; they lost much of their moral capital in their attempts to do so. Argersinger explores the practical world of day-to-day politics in which Populists tried to advance legislation to aid the farmer and the fatal compromises they made along the way. For Argersinger it was fusion with the Democrats that sounded the death knell of true reform. But, as he himself notes, differences of opinion and divisions within the movement contributed equally to Populism's downfall. (I have argued a somewhat similar position elsewhere but see organizational structure, not fusion, as the key variable in determining "failure.")

To read about Populism is to read about political treachery, destruction of democratic ideals, and the enormous difficulty of mobilizing people to support a third political party. It is an instructive lesson, and Argersinger tells it well. **Scott G. McNall**, *Provost, California State University, Chico*.