

"Things as They Should Be"

Jeffersonian Idealism and Rural Rebellion in Minnesota and North Dakota 1910-1920

Larry Remele

JEFFERSONIAN DEMOCRACY, a philosophy based on the belief that "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God," guided the rural insurgencies that swept Minnesota and North Dakota in the early 20th century.¹ Though the ideas had been modified in the century since Thomas Jefferson first enunciated them, the conception that the farmer was the basis of all wealth and the bastion of democratic ideals remained a vital tool for agitation and propaganda. Indeed, it served to unite rural people and challenge an established economic and political hierarchy in the early years of this century.

The foundation of Jefferson's philosophy was his belief that the farmer represented the basis of democratic society. Jefferson wrote that independent, self-sufficient, tolerant, and educated landholders provided the best protection for liberty and had "substantial and genuine virtue." Accordingly, he wanted government to extend and enhance rural power, calling for geographical expansion to provide land for small farms, free trade to allow international exchange of agricultural produce for overseas manufactures, and limited government to minimize regulation and tyranny. In particular, Jefferson excoriated urbanization, likening the "mobs of great cities" to "sores" on the human body and fearing the concentration of capital.²

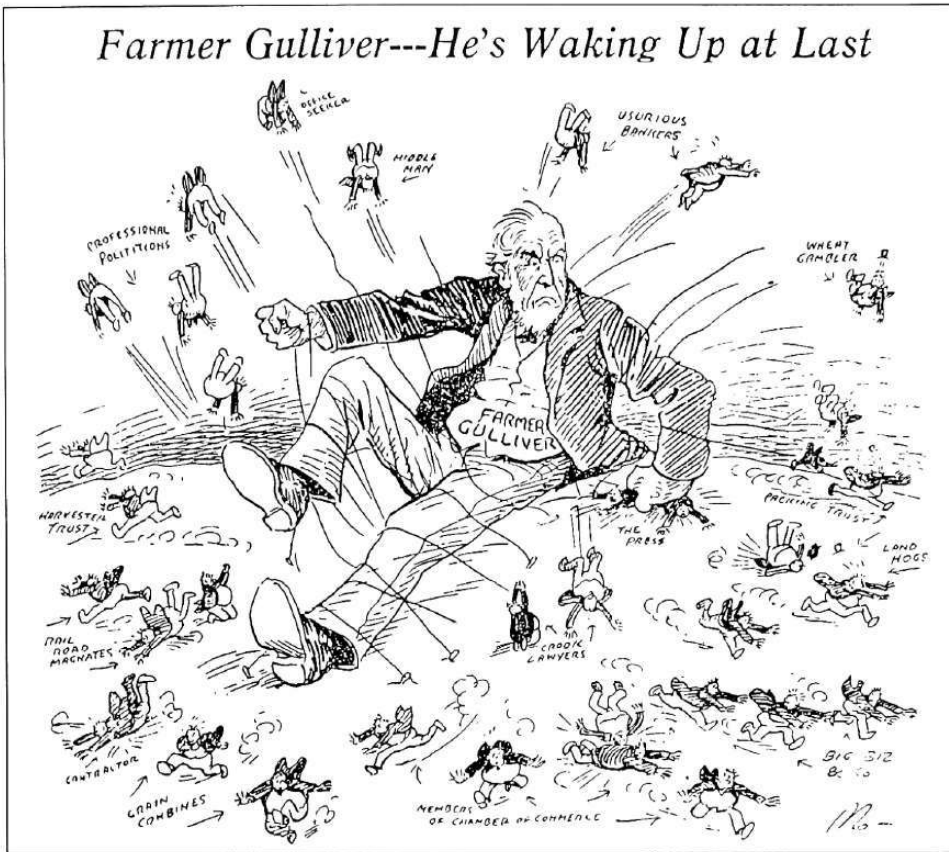
Jefferson's agrarianism enjoyed wide acceptance. But in the 19th century the United States changed greatly. Power gravitated from the farms and rural areas to the major manufacturing centers, headquarters for great banking and industrial networks. Though the majority of the population still lived on small farms, it lost political and economic influence. Many people came to believe that government no longer served their needs and thought themselves deceived, robbed, manipulated, ridiculed, and scorned. In response, rural movements emerged; they called on farm people to re-

¹ The following synopsis of Jeffersonian democracy is drawn from Saul K. Padover, ed., *Thomas Jefferson on Democracy* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939); Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962). See also the concise definition in Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 184-185. The best critique of Jeffersonian ideas as manifested in late 19th- and early 20th-century farm movements is Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

² Padover, ed., *Jefferson on Democracy*, 69-70.

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Farmer Gulliver---He's Waking Up at Last



THIS NPL view of the embattled farmer breaking his Lilliputian bonds appeared in the *Nonpartisan Leader*, March 9, 1916.

claim their rightful place of honor within American society. Foremost among them in the 20th century were the American Society of Equity and the Nonpartisan League (NPL).³ Both movements had co-operative origins and populist goals. The American Society of Equity, first organized in Indiana, moved to the Upper Midwest in the early years of the century; it called upon farmers to organize purchasing and marketing co-operatives as alternatives to an economic system it believed to be exploitive. The Equity Society became the largest farm organization in the region after 1907. It, however, was frustrated by its lack of political voice, and from Equity origins came the major farmers' movement of the era, the Nonpartisan League.

Begun in North Dakota in 1915, the NPL and its charismatic leadership called for direct state intervention in the economy on behalf of rural and urban producers. Within four years the NPL had become a political power throughout the Midwest and was the major progressive movement of the time. Its greatest successes came in North Dakota and Minnesota.

Behind these movements stood the Jeffersonian ideal. Each, however, confronted a problem of making philosophy and reality conjoin, and the solution was organization. Those movements adapted Jeffersonian philosophy, accepting its ideas about the purity and goodness of rural people, but using them to motivate

farm people to seize power at the ballot box. No longer was it sufficient for farmers to act independently; indeed, if rural independence were to survive, farmers had to band together and use government to fight the usurpers who had gained unseemingly control. The result was a contradiction—the ideas of Jefferson came to serve an end that he had feared, big government and concentrated political power.

To both Equity and the NPL, Jefferson's ideas provided the basis for agitation. Rural people, said the philosophers of both movements, were producers of wealth, not mere manipulators who transferred paper and extracted a tremendous toll for dubious services. As such, rural people manifested the purest expression of democracy; they readily made compacts and worked together for the common good, asked nothing from government except justice, and asserted the simple values of honesty and industry on which the nation had

³ Here and two paragraphs below, see Robert H. Bahmer, "The Economic and Political Background of the Nonpartisan League," Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1941, and "The American Society of Equity," *Agricultural History* 14 (Jan., 1940):33–63; Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922* (Reprint ed., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985); Scott Ellsworth, "Organizing the Organized: The Origins of the Nonpartisan League," *The Organizer* 9 (Summer, 1981):4–15.

been founded. To agrarian philosophers, the farmer was the guardian of liberty, the rock on which the republic stood. He, however, had lost his rightful place in America and become a downtrodden and unappreciated toiler whose plain and virtuous existence was the object of scorn from those whose very wealth depended on rural produce, labor, and industry. Therefore, the farmer had to organize in self-defense of himself, his family, and especially his nation. Only when he did would America once again accord rural people the respect they deserved and the political power that their sheer numbers demanded.

To make those points, both the Equity Society and the NPL developed a wonderful literature, art, and music of agitation, all of it directly heir to Jeffersonian idealism and all of it effective in uniting rural people in ways that changed politics forever in the Upper Midwest. The firm base on which this rural agitation stood was clear delineation between the "good" farmer and the "bad" usurpers. Building on a solid and still vital legacy left by the Farmers' Alliance and the Populist party of the 1890s, the Equity Society and the NPL extolled the farmer while excoriating those who came to be known as the "interests," or "Big Biz." In 1914, for example, speakers at an Equity Society meeting in Fargo said that the "farmers of the northwest have furnished the capital for others to do business on; have toiled early and late; have seen vast fortunes grow and magnificent palaces erected on the money which never should have left their hands, most of it needless, much of it pure robbery." That robbery, continued the speaker, allowed "men who have been shrewd and conscienceless enough keep up their game of extracting the money of the farmer and producer" to send their families to Europe, the seaside in summer, and the south in winter. Conversely, the argument continued, "the farmer and his wife have struggled along and with farm life unattractive because of hard and unceasing labor, the boys and girls of the farm have been driven to the great cities to still further add to the congestion."⁴

This theme, the impoverishment of rural people by the "traders" of wealth, sounds throughout Equity and NPL literature. In 1916, former Minnesota congressman James Manahan wrote simply that "For years the farmers and laboring men of the Northwest have been cheated in the market place, swindled by tax-dodgers and politicians, gouged by Shylock bankers and robbed without mercy by the monopolies." In its newspaper, the *Nonpartisan Leader*, the Nonpartisan League declared that "Every year the farmer fattens up the wealth he has produced by long, hard work in the fields. . . . [and] every year when he is 'ripe' he has been reaped. . . . He comes out with tattered clothes

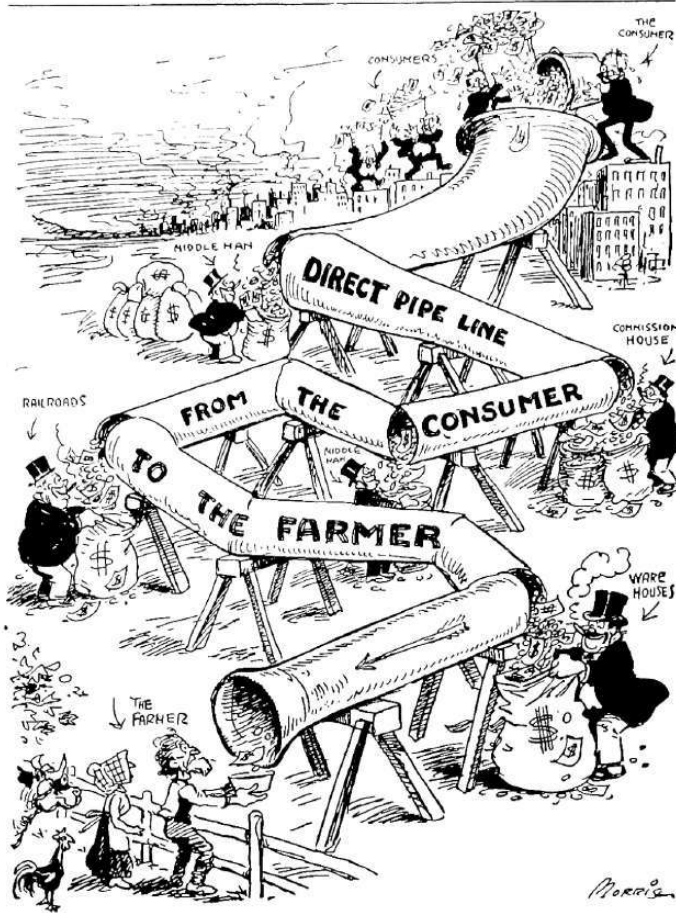
PROVING HIS "FRIENDSHIP"



RUBE GETS THE CORE



⁴ *Co-operators' Herald* (Fargo), Jan. 30, 1914, p. 1.



and empty pockets, while the stream of golden grain has been poured into the pockets of Big Biz and carted off to build palaces and fortunes.”⁵

The issue was clear: the hardworking farmer was the basis of wealth, but was victimized by an unjust economic system that allowed others to appropriate what rightfully belonged to the farmer. This picture obviously appealed mightily to many rural people in the Upper Midwest. In 1919, farmer Thomas Duxbury of Harmony, Minnesota, put the situation into verses titled “Facts About the Farmer”:

Who, since the time of Adam’s fall,
Has clothed the world and fed themselves?
Who did the wood and water haul?

The patient plodding farmer.

Who, since time now far remote,
Since ever history did make note,
Has done the work and been the goat?

The much maligned farmer.

Who freedom’s flag to breeze unfurled?
Who defiance at all tyrants hurled?
Who fired the shot heard round the world?

The embattled American farmer.

Duxbury’s stanzas credit the farmer with patriotism, forbearance, and unselfishness:

Who asks for nothing but his own,
Yet asks in vain because alone?
Who asks for bread and gets a stone?
The unorganized fool farmer.

The solution to the dilemma thus posed was obviously organization, and Duxbury leaves little to the imagination:

Who was it pointed out the way
To better things, a bright new day?
Who put democ in democracy?
The organized League farmer.⁶

Offerings such as Duxbury’s frankly invoked Jeffersonian ideals about the place of agriculture and the small farmer in the “natural order” and established a sense of common deprivation around which organizing could be accomplished. The message went beyond mere words; NPL political cartoons displayed the ideal graphically. A typical image has the farmer feeding the world; another shows the farmer balancing a complicated economic structure on his back while a stout and masked figure labeled “middleman” perches on top and robs a third figure labeled “consumer.” The NPL cartoonist “Billican” put it bluntly:

The earth should belong to all men
Equally and fairly divided—
But if all should till—then who would mill
That all could be provided—
So some must till and others mill
That each may have a share—
And they who neither till nor mill
But profit—best beware.⁸

The target for this agrarian rhetoric was variously described and depicted. Equity Society newspapers labeled the opposition simply; they were variously “the combine,” “the interests,” or “the parasites.” Such phrases left no doubt that in Equity’s opinion the struggle pitted those who were honest, open, and above-board against those who were nefarious, underhanded, and dishonest. *Co-operators’ Herald* writer Thomas J. Jackson forecast ceaseless confrontation “between the producers and the parasites” until co-operators overcame speculators who gambled with the farmer’s

⁵ *Nonpartisan Leader* (Fargo), June 1, p. 3, June 15, p. 5, both 1916.

⁶ *Minnesota Leader* (St. Paul), Dec. 6, 1919, p. 4.

⁷ *Nonpartisan Leader*, April 26, p. 1, May 17, p. 3, both 1917.

⁸ *Minnesota Leader*, June 28, 1919, p. 4.



⁹ *Co-operators' Herald*, Dec. 19, 1913, July 17, Sept. 16, 1914, all on p. 1.

¹⁰ *Nonpartisan Leader*, Jan. 20, 1916, p. 2.

¹¹ Here and below, see *Nonpartisan Leader*, Oct. 21, 1915, p. 1, May 18, p. 15, and Nov. 30, p. 1, both 1916.

money; in his opinion, the latter were "injurious micro-organisms" whose success depended "on their ability to operate from dark, secret places."⁹

Others did not hesitate to name the enemy specifically. Equity members frequently attacked the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce by name, depicting its members as "sleek and slippery hirelings" and warning farmers to avoid dealings of any kind with them. When the Nonpartisan League appeared, its skilled propagandists gave shape, form, and voice to the opposition. Writer O. M. Thomason, using the pseudonym "N. P. Dictagraph," created Will B. Crafty, "head boss for the political machine": "Crafty sat behind a flattop desk. . . . He rolled a half chewed cigar from one side of his steel-traplike mouth to the other. . . . His large, fat hand, covered over with bristly hair, drummed idly on the corner of the desk. A black, stubby mustache covered a firm upper and slightly drooped at the corners. A French flannel vest was buttoned snugly around a large stomach and a checked tie bulged from under a double chin. The forehead was broad but flat and the hair was closely cropped, while a pair of ratlike eyes looked piercingly through a pair of spectacles, perched on a Roman nose. The end of the nose was red. The eyes made you wince as if some one was trying to bore holes in you with a gimlet."¹⁰

Crafty, however, was clearly a hireling. According to NPL propagandists, above him was "Alex Big Biz" or some like-named character, all representative of the urban financier who "doeth the farmer right." This character always wore diamonds and a top hat, was fat and overfed, and always dressed in the latest style.¹¹ Char-

A Monument



acters more in harmony with Jefferson's proscriptions about the ultimate corruptions of urban life are difficult to imagine; rural people found the message unmistakable.

In contrast, both Equity and the NPL established a farmer symbol who personified a very positive rural image completely in concert with Jefferson's idealism. The character, named "Hi'am A. Rube," represented all that was good, clean, and upright. In appearance, this representation of the farmer looked decidedly like Uncle Sam; he was weathered by hard work in the open fields and somehow seemed timeless, a person whose values were dependable, respectable, earthy, and even perhaps pure and unfettered by avarice and greed. At various times, this image transmuted into the "Shade of Lincoln" plowing out corruption from the fields of government, or a Pilgrim Father protecting democracy against all harm. In these images, the farmer became a father figure, a protector of all the fragile values of a democratic society.

Graphic images made comparison easy. On the one hand stood the forces of corruption and on the other stood the forces of good—there could be little doubt which side was right. The battle between these two was cast in Jeffersonian language filled with heroic images. To challenge the "Bold Boast of the Tyrant," rural movements dared rural people to recognize themselves as liberators. NPL president Arthur C. Townley called

farmers "the guardians of liberty of the people of the United States" and explained their mission as "to succor, to rescue [America] from this hell on earth where men starve in the midst of plenty." In this he echoed Equity Society declarations of allegiance to the principles of "equal rights to all and special privileges to none." The rural movement propagandists depicted "Average Farmer[s]" meting out doses of "liberty tonic" to a diminished and decidedly devilish opposition; they portrayed the farmer sounding a liberty bell labeled "the People's Rights." To this patriotic image were added allusions to heroes such as Paul Revere, shown riding through the countryside to call farmers to "win a glorious victory over the forces of autocracy."¹²

The language of battle permeated all rural movement literature. Before the 1916 North Dakota primary election, NPL papers asked farmers "Will YOU Do YOUR Part?" and drew the league farmer as a gladia-

¹² *Nonpartisan Leader*, Oct. 12, p. 4, Nov. 2, p. 1, both 1916, and April 12, 1917, p. 9; *Co-operators' Herald*, Mar. 6, 1914, p. 2.

BREAKING SOME NEW GROUND



November 30, 1916





tor in heroic struggle with a fallen opponent labeled "Old Gang Politics" whose weapon bore the caption "boss rule." The *Minnesota Leader* published a song with the following verses:

Now the patriots true, are coming to the fight,
And the armies, too, are not the weak
and small,
So, God bless them while we sing, that the farmer
is the king,
For the farmer is the man who feeds them all.
From the rising to the setting of the sun,
Great monopolies are surely doomed to fall,
Then onward in the fight, and we'll battle
for the right,
While the farmer is the man who feeds
us all.¹³

And followed such verses with a chorus:

For these farm organizations, the battle had obvious goals. First and foremost was "right and justice," a phrase that calls to mind Jeffersonian assertions about the purity and goodness of rural people. A Jordan,

¹³ *Nonpartisan Leader*, June 1, 29, 1916, both p. 1; *Minnesota Leader*, June 29, 1918, p. 4.

constitutional right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”¹⁵ To this end, the NPL invoked the words of Abraham Lincoln, “With malice toward none, with charity for all.” Protection of liberty and freedom, prosperity for producers and consumers, and an end to class hatred and suspicion, goals that Jefferson would have expected from a farmers’ movement, were the reasons for battle.

These words and symbols proclaim the continuing power of Jeffersonian democracy in early 20th century agrarian movements in Minnesota and North Dakota. The effort to meld farmers into a powerful political weapon called upon many of the symbolic and philosophical images popularized a century earlier by the agrarian president, an aristocratic Virginia slaveholder. His elevation of the small landholding farmer from yeoman to safekeeper and bastion of democracy became the centerpiece for a later generation’s struggle. While those movements expanded his agrarianism to include urban workers under the umbrella of the “producing

class,” they did not change his intent to uphold the common people as the saviors of democracy. The resulting literature of agitation graphically separated the toilers from the traducers and established the basis for political struggle that came to involve thousands of people. Jefferson, we may assume, would have agreed with the results that both the Equity and the NPL sought—to make “things as they should be”—and provide rural people with the respect and honor of a grateful society.

¹⁵ *Nonpartisan Leader*, June 1, p. 1, Nov. 2, p. 16–17, Jan. 6, p. 6—all 1916.

THE CARTOONS on p. 17 are from the *Minnesota Leader*, Dec. 6, 1919 (p. 4) and July 6, 1919 (p. 3). All others are from the *Nonpartisan Leader*: p. 18, Dec. 24, 1917 (p. 1); p. 19, May 17, 1917 (p. 3) and Oct. 21, 1915 (p. 1); p. 20, May 18, 1916 (p. 15); p. 21, Nov. 2, 1916 (p. 1) and July 20, 1916 (p. 12); p. 22, Nov. 11, 1915 (p. 1).



Things As They Should Be



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