

THE UNDERSIDE OF HISTORY: AMERICAN METHODISM, CAPITALISM AND POPULAR STRUGGLE

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Methodism has just recently celebrated its bicentennial as an American denomination, having been so constituted in 1784. Yet in terms of historical scholarship the relationship between the Methodist tradition and the expansion and exploitation which accompanied the development of United States capitalism has been largely overlooked. One way of understanding that history is by focusing on two strains or streams within the evolution of American Methodism. The first stream is "popular" Methodism, popular in so far as it was an expression of the Methodist tradition as created by the oppressed themselves in their protest and struggle against the dominant social order. Popular Methodist was most clearly embodied in movements for social and political change as expressed in populism and socialism.

The second form of Methodism is radical Methodism as articulated by progressive middle class Methodists who by their solidarity with the poor and oppressed were formulates of a radical social gospel and Christian Socialism. The following analysis places greater emphasis on popular Methodism than the middle class advocates of radical Methodism, the rationale being that the hopes and dreams of oppressed people have most often been denied a place and a voice in the history of official Methodism. Yet, both streams are an important part of a needed historical memory that can provide a link between the past and the present as we engage in shaping the present and consider possible options for the future.

At issue methodologically is also the ways in which Methodism has served to reinforce certain values, cognitions and symbols which are learned and internalized so that one accepts the capitalist social order and its values and thereby rejects alternatives to them.¹ Charles Long has argued persuasively that the dominant people partake of a cultural language, be that theological, political, or socio-economic which "conceals the inner depths, the archaic dimensions of the dominant people" while at the same time it renders invisible oppressed people and the underlying contradictions of American society.²

Social Basis of American Methodism

The most appropriate starting point for a consideration of popular Methodism is a brief analysis of the changing social basis of the Methodist

¹Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 182.

²Charles H. Long, "Civil Rights-Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion," in *American Civil Religion* edited by Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper Row, 1974), 214.

tradition. E. P. Thompson has maintained that Methodism originated as a religion of the poor and in the beginning American Methodism had its centers among the poor of the cities of the Eastern seaboard.³ The phenomenal growth of Methodism among the poor in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was due in part to its unique form of evangelization. Bishop Francis Asbury adopted from John Wesley his system of rotating ministers and elaborated it to include a designated territory of preaching, known as a circuit, which created mobility for appointed ministers who preached throughout their circuits at stated intervals.⁴ These travelling preachers or "circuit riders" have been best described as "homely, often, unlettered, pious, and given to unbending labor for minuscule pay."⁵ They were aided by local preachers, usually laypersons of local churches, who felt a call to preach and were, like travelling preachers, most often drawn from people of little wealth, prestige, or status. The appeal of Methodism to the poor, in spite of its autocratic hierarchical structure, was its message of universal grace, of unconditional election, which when combined with its egalitarian spirit presented a marked contrast to the established churches with their Calvinistic underpinnings and working alliance with the dominant socio-economic order. The leading figure in the development of American Methodism was Francis Asbury who wrote that the "poor . . . will, the rich may possibly, hear the truth," for he believed that "the poor . . . are the people we are more immediately called to preach to."⁶ It was the poor who most quickly responded to the preaching of Methodist itinerant preachers. One very important example is the response of the poor of Lynn, Massachusetts, later to become the center of Methodism in New England. Here Methodists won the majority of their converts from the ranks of mechanics, and the Methodist preachers who converted them were later described by a historian of Lynn as individuals who "sympathized deeply with the common people, and made themselves perfectly at home in every family which they visited and became acquainted with. Their open, free social intercourse with the people was one of the great secrets of their success."⁷

While the social basis of Methodism lay in the dispossessed, its development was in the hands of members of the middle class. The

³Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 351; H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1929), 171.

⁴John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1972), 6.

⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

⁶*Ibid.*, 169.

⁷Paul Gustaf Faler, "Workingmen, Mechanics and Social Change: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1800-1960," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1972), 120-103.

Methodist Episcopal Church was a connectional church which placed its administrative power in its bishops who had control over the appointment of travelling preachers. Though travelling preachers were members of the Annual Conference, local preachers were not entitled to membership in the Conference and lay participation was effectively excluded. There were those within the church who viewed the hierarchical structure of the church as violating the principles of republicanism. Unlike their Tory founder, most early Methodists were Jeffersonian republicans whose ideology underlay the founding of the republic and was characterized by natural rights not founded on property and equality which was more than for whites only.⁸ The first major division within the church came over the issue of the control which a bishop had over circuits and the placement of ministers. The schism was led by James O'Kelly who with a group of supporters established the Republican Methodist Church. O'Kelly claimed that the Conference was not a representative body of the church and the governmental form was nonrepublican in structure.⁹ Just as the church divided over the issue of the powers assigned to its bishops, so it was to again divide thirty years later, in the 1820s, over the issue of lay participation. This led to the formation of the Methodist Protestant Church.

The growth of Methodism coincides with both the expansion of a nation and the rise and development of the factory system. Similar to its counterpart in England, Methodism was also to become the popular religion of working class people; i.e., factory operatives, artisans, and mechanics like those of Lynn, Massachusetts.¹⁰ In addition, as in England, Methodism was to find considerable support from manufacturers who found in Methodism a means of social control and work discipline for their workers. As H. Richard Niebuhr has noted, the middle class leaders of Methodism were not so much impressed by "the social evils from which the poor suffered as by the vices to which they had succumbed."¹¹ These same leaders joined hands with manufacturers in campaigns for the moral content of education, control of liquor traffic, Sabbath closing, and the

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 103-105; Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, 174-175; Boles, *op. cit.*, 179-180.

⁹Frederick A. Norwood, "The Church Takes Shape," in *The History of American Methodism*, Vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 440-452.

¹⁰Barbara M. Tucker, "Our Good Methodists: The Church, the Factory, and the Working Class in Ante-bellum Webster, Massachusetts," *The Maryland Historian*, 8/3 (Fall, 1977), 27. See also Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). Bruce Laurie, "Nothin on Compulsion: Life Styles of Philadelphia Artisans, 1820-1860," in *American Working Class Culture*, edited by Milton Canton (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979). Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980). Daniel Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

¹¹Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, 67.

suppression of popular forms of entertainment and amusement.¹² This “moral policing” was part of what industrialists sought for a disciplined work force, pacing its toil and life cycle to the requirements of the machine and clock, to create a well-behaved and obedient labor force.¹³ The campaign for creating the values of deference and self-discipline informed the Methodist Sunday School, with the superintendent of the Sunday School often being the superintendent of the factory. Mixed with lessons of devotion to Christ and fear of death were found the importance of punctuality, self-restraint, and self-regulation of behavior, all part of a work ethic highly valued by the owners of capital.¹⁴

Control extended beyond the Sunday School to the churches, which in some cases were built and supported by manufacturers. An omnipresent paternalism seemed to pervade every aspect of workers’ lives from the crib to the grave.¹⁵ The other side, of course, is what working class people made of the Methodist tradition. Here again the findings are not too dissimilar from those of E. P. Thompson. Methodism offered a feeling of community to people in the midst of the transition from what would become the hardships of a wage-economy. Emphasis was placed on equality, participation, and responsibility not offered by the factory. Working class people assumed roles as lay preachers, stewards, class leaders, and Sunday School teachers. In addition, labor reformers such as Edward H. Rogers, Richard Travellick, and William Sylvis found in the Methodist tradition, with its stress on “free agency” and universal grace, means of affirming the inherent worth of the individual and the priority of labor over capital.¹⁶

By the post Civil War period a significant number of changes had overtaken the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Methodist churches were the largest and wealthiest denominational body in the country, with a mission less to the poor and impoverished, who still made up the majority of its members in the west and rural areas, than to the rich and powerful. Methodist bishops seemed more preoccupied with preaching responsibility to the rich and patience to the poor than addressing major social and economic issues. In the north and east, a trained and more highly educated

¹²Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*, p. 38; Faler, *op. cit.*, 44-74. David Montgomery, “The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kinsington Riots of 1844,” in *Workers in the Industrial Revolution* edited by Peter N. Stearns and Daniel J. Walkowitz (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1974), 44-74.

¹³Tucker, *op. cit.*, 26-32. E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present*, no. 38 (December, 1967) 56-97.

¹⁴Tucker, *op. cit.*, 39-41; Walkowitz, *op. cit.*, 122-124.

¹⁵Tucker, *op. cit.*, 28; Walkowitz, *op. cit.*, 187-192.

¹⁶Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 379; Tucker, *op. cit.*, 26-32; Walkowitz, *op. cit.*, 122-192. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republics, 1862-1872* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 200-203.

clergy was becoming more the rule than the exception in urban areas; patterned after its Presbyterian and Episcopalian counterparts it took as its model a professional ministry. Less and less was seen of its earlier circuit riders as they were replaced by residential pastorates. Methodists, like other Protestants, came to believe firmly in the God given goodness of *laissez-faire* capitalism. This is not surprising given the role which wealthy Methodists such as Daniel Drew, Issac Rich, Lee Claffin, and Jacob Sleeper played in erecting seminaries, church buildings, and all the trappings of what Mark Twain so aptly called the Gilded Age.¹⁷

From the time of Wesley, Methodism's ethical tone was individualistic rather than social, concerned less with social inequalities and more with the correction of personal vices. For H. Richard Niebuhr, Methodist ethics was not "the social ethics of the Sermon on the Mount but the sober, individual ethics of the 'Serious Call' and of Moravian piety."¹⁸ Wesley's dictum of "gain all you can, save all you gain, give all you can" seemed very well suited to salving the conscience of Methodism's newly found celebration of the sanctity of private property, competition and the "fixed relation between godliness expressed in economic virtues and success and between vice and poverty."¹⁹ It is little wonder that Niebuhr concluded that "more than Presbyterianism or Congregationalism Methodism came to be the religion of the business class."²⁰ The changes that had taken place were best described by the Methodist historian Moses Scudder who lamented that:

The barn, the kitchen, and the wayside where Methodism worshipped, have changed to spacious churches, with elaborate finish, and every appliance of convenience and comfort. The once humble membership, despised and excluded from social rank, take their place now among the "princes of Israel" more in peril perhaps from flatteries of the world than they had been before from its contempt or frowns. Instead of being the cast-out and the "spoken against," they have come to be patronized and honored.²¹

Popular Methodism and Agrarian Revolt: Populism

While segments of Methodist churches assumed a natural correlation between Christianity and capitalism, popular Methodism as manifest in the Populist movement sought to challenge capitalist political hegemony.

¹⁷Walter W. Benjamin, "The Methodist Episcopal Church in the Postwar Era," in *The History of American Methodism*, Vol. II edited by Emory Stevens Bucke (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 316-326, 335-339; Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective*, Vol. I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), 277; Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 188-190.

¹⁸Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, 65.

¹⁹Benjamin, *op. cit.*, 335-339. Yehoshua Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 247.

²⁰Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, 71-72.

²¹Schudder, *op. cit.*, 292.

Populism was an agrarian revolt which spanned the decades of the 1880s and 1890s and began in Texas and spread through the south, midwest, and west, creating a mass-based movement of over two million people. It was strongest in the south, which was still largely agrarian and rural and dominated by Protestant denominations, with Methodists and Baptists having the overwhelming majority of church members.²² Populism grew in response to the brutalizing realities of the day-to-day existence of most southern farmers who worked the land. The controlling factor of their lives was the crop lien system. By this system the farmer would get the things that were needed from the local merchant, and not having the money to pay for supplies, would take a lien, a mortgage on the future crop, which amounted to 25% interest or more. The farmer would owe more and more money every year, until finally the farm was taken away and the farmer became a tenant, usually paying rent on land once owned. Tenant-operated farms in the former eleven states of the Confederacy plus Kentucky composed 37% of all farms in 1880 and rose to 47% by 1900.²³ Lawrence Goodwyn's history of populism, *Democratic Promises*, describes the crop lien system as being for "millions of Southerners, white and black, a little more than modified form of slavery."²⁴ As a mass movement populism evolved from farm cooperatives to a third political party, as populist came to believe that both of the established parties were controlled by corporate capitalism. Politically, populism sought to forge an alliance between the south and west, to join together farmers and industrial workers, and to establish a political union of white and black farmers and workers throughout the south.²⁵

Rank and file Methodist populists were farmers, workers, and lay preachers, preachers who more often than not earned their livelihood on the land or in the mill village in the same occupations as their parishioners. As might be expected, resistance and hostility to populism was forthcoming from denominational leadership and from clergy of more affluent churches.²⁶ Edwin A. Yates, presiding elder of the Raleigh district of North Carolina, in responding to populism defended the church's support of the political status quo by stating that the church must oppose "anarchy" and

²²Wallace M. Alston, Jr., and Wayne Flynt, "Religion in the Land of Cotton," in *You Can't Eat Magnolias* edited by H. Brandt Ayers and Thomas Naylor (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), 100-106.

²³Bruce Palmer, *"Man over Money": the Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), xiv. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: the Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 26-31.

²⁴Goodwyn, *op. cit.*, 28.

²⁵Robert C. McMath, *Populist Vanguard* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 135. J. Wayne Flynt, *Forgotten People: the South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 53-54.

²⁶Alston and Flynt, *op. cit.*, 112-112; Palmer, *op. cit.*, 24.

“nihilism” for “it can but align itself with the powers that be, for they are ordained of God . . . [and] the business of the church is to save souls, and not to rectify governments and make civil laws.”²⁷ In distinction to the church’s leadership, a popularly based Methodism allied itself with the populist struggle and responded to leaders such as Yates with tart rejoinders like this observation of a Texas populist: “Christ did not come, as our theological quacks are so fond of saying, to prepare men for another world, but to teach them how to rightly live in this.”²⁸ Methodism, like other forms of evangelical Protestantism, was deeply embedded in southern culture and its religious language had a political power which spoke for the oppressed as no other.

While the Methodist hierarchy spoke about saving souls for the life hereafter, common people talked about wealth as belonging to those who created it and a religion “which cannot mingle with . . . politics as looks to the betterment of the part of mankind which is oppressed and driven to poverty and desperation is none of Christ’s religion.”²⁹ Methodists became populist organizers, orators, and leaders. Cyrus Thompson, active layperson and prominent populist, attacked the nations’ religious leaders for allying themselves with the financial and industrial representatives of capital. Thompson was soon under attack himself by the “respectable” leadership of the Methodist Church and among the few, but courageous, pastors who defended Thompson was D. H. Tuttle who maintained “it would take an archangel from heaven with a search warrant, backed by a \$1,000 reward, to find a preacher with grace and grit to turn a rich man out of the church.”³⁰

Populism was based on the idea of cooperation; it reflected the effort of farmers to create their own culture and political party and to gain respect as persons in a society controlled by capitalism.³¹ It criticized industrialized capitalism and demanded a more equitable distribution of wealth; it accused capitalism of degrading and impoverishing the individual. Acceptance was given neither to the myths of *laissez-faire* ideology nor to those liberals who offered “progressive” alternatives.³² Sympathy was shown to the growing labor movement and support was given to labor strikes and boycotts. Farmers and industrial workers felt a common bond. Southern populism sought to combat racism and in some instances was politically interracial in a part of the country which witnessed the rising tide of white supremacy and white supremacy politics as practiced by the

²⁷McMath, *op. cit.*, 135.

²⁸Palmer, *op. cit.*, 24.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰McMath, *op. cit.*, 136.

³¹Goodwyn, *op. cit.*, 540-542.

³²Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1962), 11-12.

Democratic Party. The noted historian C. Van Woodward believes that “never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together as they did during the populist struggles.”³³ This is not to say that populism did not suffer from the limitations of its time, but for the south of the late 19th century any struggle against racism was significant. Populism as a mass movement can be best summarized by this passage from Lawrence Goodwyn’s study of populism where he concludes that populism’s

. . . animating essence pulsed at every level of the ambitious structure of cooperation: in the earnest probings of people bent on discovery of a way to free themselves from the killing grip of the credit system . . . and most telling, in the latent generosity of those who had little, to emphasize with those who had less. (“We extend to the Knights of Labor our hearty sympathy in their manly struggle against monopolistic oppression,” and “The Negro people are part of the part and must be treated as such.”)³⁴

Popular Methodism and the Struggle for Socialism

Populism as a mass movement was already on the decline by the political election of 1896, the same year in which corporate capitalism’s candidate for the presidency, a staunch Methodist layperson named William McKinley, came into office. Four years later with the dawn of the 20th century, capitalism was to face its greatest enemy in the political history of the United States: a mass based Socialist Party. Ideologically the party was distinguishable from its populist predecessor in its emphasis on the revolutionary role of the proletariat and the importance of class struggle on the local and national level.³⁵ In 1912 the Socialist Party’s presidential candidate, Eugene Victor Debs, had received 6% of the presidential vote and the Socialist Party had some 1200 of its members in public offices in 340 municipalities from the east to the west coast, among them 79 mayors in 24 states. The party’s membership stood at 118,000 and through its 323 English and foreign language publications reached over 2 million people. Even in the midst of the repressive atmosphere created with America’s entry into the First World War, the anti-war atmosphere created with America’s entry into the First World War, the anti-war stance of the party still resulted in the election of 32 socialist state legislators.³⁶

The Socialist Party formed in 1901 was heterogeneous in its make-up, combining reformists, trade unionists, agrarian radicals, Christian

³³C. Van Woodward, *op. cit.*, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 222.

³⁴Goodwyn, *op. cit.*, 541.

³⁵James Robert Green, “Socialism and the Southern Class Struggle, 1898-1918: A Study in Radical Movements in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, unpublished doctoral dissertation (New Haven: Yale University, 1972), 1.

³⁶James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 27, 84, 92, 103, 115.

Socialists, revolutionary syndicalists, and left-wing Marxists. The Socialist Party was diffuse geographically with its greatest voting strength coming from the west and southwest, in the states where mining, lumbering, and tenant farming predominated.³⁷ Diverse as the party was, it was united in its strategy of making the conflict of socialism and capitalism a central issue in all of its public activity. The party's energy was focused on union organizing and electoral politics as a vehicle for making socialism part of the American political agenda. Its elected officials were for the most part workers who broke the traditional pattern of elitist politics.³⁸

Popular Methodists were part of the struggle for socialism in the southwestern section of the United States, especially Texas and Oklahoma. Texas and Oklahoma socialists were strong supporters of the party's left-wing and most sought to bring ministers into the party. Oklahoma socialists, in particular, were in the vanguard of the struggle against racism.³⁹ The socialist movement in this part of the country was organized by former populists, militant miners, railroad workers, and scores of socialist agitators, among whom some of the most effective were Methodist preachers. Out of Texas came socialist revivalists, preachers such as M. A. Smith, Stanley J. Clark, and G. G. Hamilton, who spoke in the languages of the people about capitalist exploitation, Socialist alternatives, and a God who sided with poor and oppressed people.⁴⁰ This form of grass-root socialism among Methodists was most clearly evident in the state of Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Socialist Party was the most important state Socialist organization next to New York. In 1914 the people of Oklahoma elected five state representatives and one senator who were Socialists while the Socialist Party's gubernatorial candidate polled 21% of the state returns.⁴¹ The social basis of the party was not to be found in the towns or major cities, but in the rural countryside, populated by evangelical Protestants.

Socialism to these evangelicals, was not something abstract or theoretical, but an immediate and concrete political answer to a poor and poverty ridden people. It was a socialism which stressed cooperation, human worth, and the placing of the land into the "hands of the tillers of the soil."⁴² They were not reformists or gradualists, for they knew that

³⁷James Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy: the Left in American Politics* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 7.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 4-5, James Weinstein, "Socialism's Hidden Heritage," in *For a New America* edited by James Weinstein and David W. Eakins (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 229-231.

³⁹Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America*, *op. cit.*, 17-19; Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 220-237.

⁴⁰Green, *op. cit.*, 113-152. James Robert Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 126-175.

⁴¹Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 8.

⁴²Statement from the 1914 program of the Socialist Party of Oklahoma as cited in Burbank, *op. cit.*, 9.

conflict and struggle were necessary to the establishment of socialism. They differed from other socialists in that their understanding of socialism was shaped by what has been stereotyped as conservative evangelical Protestantism. The experiences of conversion, religious revivals, prayer and Bible study were central to their understanding of the Methodist tradition, shaped an understanding of socialism as an agency for the creation of a Kingdom of justice, equality, and cooperation. The Kingdom of God was historical and not otherworldly, and it was a Kingdom that would not come so long as "men are underpaid, while women are overworked. While children grow up in squalor, while exploiting and social injustice remain."⁴³ The same intensity which characterized the protractor revival camp meetings of the 19th century were part of the socialists "revivals," which like the one held in 1912 at Synder, Oklahoma, a small town of 250, drew 20,000 people in a one week period.⁴⁴ Here men and women would come from miles around to listen to socialist speakers, usually socialist preachers or national leaders such as Eugene V. Debs, to sing populist songs with new socialist words, to discuss socialist literature, or to argue about the Bible and Socialism.⁴⁵ Socialist meetings would often open and end with a prayer like this one which appeared in Oklahoma Socialist publication *Sword of Truth*:

Permeate our souls with divine discontent and righteous rebellion. Strengthen within us the spirit of revolt; and may we continue to favor that which is fair and rise in anger against the wrong, until the Great Revolution shall come to free men and women from their fetters and enable them to be good kind and noble and human!

O Lord, hasten the day!⁴⁶

Popular Methodist preachers were those described by G. G. Hamilton: "the kind of preachers who till the soil, pound iron, and build houses."⁴⁷ Most often they were lay preachers who were evaluated in the local socialist newspapers as much for their Christian beliefs as their socialism commitment. We have the description of a "brother G. A. Lambreth a noble Christian preacher and an ardent Socialist" or a preacher described as a "red card Socialist as well as a consistent Christian."⁴⁸ Socialist preaching denounced the sins of capitalist minded clergy and their cohorts, Darwinism, and demon rum.

These rural socialists exhibited a strong sense of a coming class struggle between agricultural workers and their capitalist oppressors which was forthcoming with the entry of the United States into the First World War. Wartime anti-socialist hysteria was created by both a governmental policy

⁴³Burbank, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁴⁴Green, "Socialism and the Southern Class Struggle," *op. cit.*, 14.

⁴⁵Green, *Ibid.*, 142-146; Burbank, *op. cit.*, 38-31.

⁴⁶Burbank, *op. cit.*, 19-20.

⁴⁷Burbank, *op. cit.*, 25.

⁴⁸Burbank, *op. cit.*, 22.

of suppression of any form of dissent to the war and local patriotic vigilantism which were part of the configuration of destruction which led to the decline of Oklahoma socialism. The other ingredient in the suppression of Oklahoma socialists was an ill-planned armed uprising in Eastern Oklahoma during August of 1917. The rebels were hard-pressed tenant farmers who opposed the war and bitterly resented the newly enacted draft laws. While the uprising centered in an area which had strongly supported the Socialist Party, the rebellion was organized by a syndicalist organization called the Working Class Union. The plan was to march on Washington, seize the government, and stop what they considered the "rich man's war." On August 3, 1917, the rebellion began with the belief that they would be joined by thousands of other men and women. In the end, after unsuccessful attempts to cut telegraph wires and burn bridges, the rebel "army" was met by a well-armed posse which dispersed some and arrested others.⁴⁹ The rebellion only added fuel to the flames of an already existing anti-socialist sentiment. The war, the rebellion, and patriotism led to the demise of the Oklahoma Socialist Party. Garin Burbank's conclusion is that in spite of the forces of destruction which were used against Oklahoma socialists, they were able to hold out as long as they did because of the fervor of their belief in the need for community and the wedding of a people, a land, and a Bible.⁵⁰

Radical Methodism and Christian Socialism

Popular Methodism of the southwest was not the only expression of support for the Socialist Party in the first two decades of the 20th century. Methodists could also be found among those who formed the Christian socialist organizations which advocated participation in the Socialist Party. The leading Christian Socialist organization was the Christian Socialist Fellowship which had a readership of over 19,000 for its publication *The Christian Socialist*.⁵¹ Unlike either its English or European counterparts the Christian Socialist Fellowship did not seek to "christianize" socialism or socialists but maintained that "as active members of the Socialist Party we thoroughly accept the economic interpretation of social and political causes, and have no desire to qualify it by a revisionist demand; and we are fully convinced that, as a matter of policy, the party ought strictly to avoid every form of religious and anti-religious theory or dogma. . . ,"⁵² They saw their main task the converting of their fellow Christians to the cause of socialism. Jesus was portrayed as a revolutionary figure who sided with the oppressed and who in the words of Edward Ellis

⁴⁹Burbank, *op. cit.*, 108-153.

⁵⁰Burbank, *op. cit.*, 40.

⁵¹Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, op. cit.*, 95.

⁵²Eliot White, "The Christian Socialist Fellowship," *The Arena* 41/229 (January, 1909), 47.

Carr, one of the leaders of the Fellowship, engaged in the "the historic struggle of the class-conscious proletariat toward the co-operative commonwealth."⁵³ The teachings of Jesus demanded not only a struggle against capitalism but a new social order in which "men and women, outcast, maimed and weak" could live in a just and equitable society.⁵⁴

The Christian Socialist Fellowship was made up of pastors, seminary professors, social workers, and laypeople, members of main-line Protestant churches. At its peak the Fellowship had 500 active members and an additional 500 associate members with district organizing secretaries in 26 states, mostly the north and northeastern sections of the United States.⁵⁵ Christian socialists supported the left-wing of the Socialist Party and were more conscious of the problems of racism than the party as a whole and contained an active black membership within the Fellowship. Through their publication, *The Christian Socialist*, they "exhibited a militant loyalty to the working class."⁵⁶

Methodist participation in the Christian Socialist Fellowship is evidenced by a special edition of *The Christian Socialist* for Methodists with a lead article entitled "Methodism-Socialism." The article reminded Methodists that they were once a movement of the poor, and as Methodists struggled in the past on behalf of the working class so were socialists in the present, and the key question facing Methodists was "which side are we on?"⁵⁷ Methodist commitment to socialism is best illustrated by the life of Edward Ellis Carr. Carr was a former pastor of a successful church in Danville, Illinois, a church from which he withdrew to found a "People's Church," a labor church which would serve the needs of working class people. He and his family struggled for a number of years on a subsistence level, believing that the establishment of socialism took priority over a more comfortable life-style. He was one of the founding members of the Socialist Party and editor of *The Christian Socialist* as well as secretary of the Christian Socialist Fellowship.⁵⁸ Carr was emphatic that the purpose of the Fellowship was to "win religious people to Socialism and not socialists to Christianity."⁵⁹ He was particularly insistent that the task of the Fellowship was to capture and revolutionize the churches for socialism. This was possible he believed because "all the Christian Churches belong to Socialism by virtue of their faith in Jesus. Let us claim our own."⁶⁰

⁵³Edward Ellis Carr, "Economic Science or Sectarian Dogmatism," *The Christian Socialist* (May 15, 1907), 1.

⁵⁴J. Peter Brunner, "Prayer," *The Christian Socialist* 5/17 (September 1, 1908), 1.

⁵⁵Robert T. Handy, "Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920," *Church History* 21/1 (March, 1952), 44.

⁵⁶Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America*, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁵⁷Jesse S. Dancy, "Methodism-Socialism," *The Christian Socialist* 5/17 (September 1, 1908), 1.

⁵⁸White, *op. cit.*, 49; Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in American*, *op. cit.*, 20.

⁵⁹Edward Ellis Carr, "Editorial," *The Christian Socialist* 3 (May 1, 1906), 4.

⁶⁰Edward Ellis Carr, "Editorial," *The Christian Socialist* 3 (June 1, 1906), 4.

Radical Methodism and the Social Gospel

The Socialist Party by the beginning of the 1920s was no longer a threat to the established order. Its demise was due largely to government repression because of its "unalterable opposition to the war" and internal divisions over the appropriateness of the Bolshevik model for waging revolutionary change inside of the United States.⁶¹ By the time of the Socialist Party's decline the Methodist Episcopal Church had considerably modified its conservative theological and individualistic social orientation towards a more liberal theological stance with greater concern for the poor and related issues. Most of the internal changes in the outlook of the church were due to the articulators of a social gospel.⁶² The term social gospel is best applied to a movement among middle class Protestants, largely but not exclusively clergy, which dates from the late 19th century to the third decade of the 20th century and was the bringing together of experience with the contradictions of capitalistic oppression and a new theological framework of understanding. The formulators of the social gospel were men and women who had experienced first hand the inherent contradictions of industrial capitalism, with its bitter conflicts between labor and capital, the gulf between wealth and poverty, and a society reeling under the impact of rapid industrialization and urbanization. As pastors of mainly urban congregations, social workers, church extension workers, and pastors of working class parishes, they sought, within the limitations of a reformist approach to socio-political change, to make the church responsive to the needs of workers, Blacks, and immigrants; conscious of the inadequacies of traditional responses to societal ills.⁶³ Methodists up until the turn of the century still viewed sin as the root of all Social ills and individual redemption as the only solution. The theological presuppositions of the social gospel movement were those of liberal theology which held first of all to progress, whether interpreted as ongoing development or the gradual realization of the Kingdom of God in history. Secondly, the teachings of Jesus served as the basic criterion for judging the individual and society. This most often meant that such abstract concepts as cooperation, mutuality, service, and personality were seen as the determinants in the formulation of economic and social policy. Thirdly,

⁶¹Leslie Marcy, "The Emergency National Convention," *International Socialist Review*, 17 (May, 1917), 670. Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1978), 119-121, 125-127. James Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy*, *op. cit.*, 19-25.

⁶²Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective*. Part of a series on Methodism and Society, Vol. I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), 289-292. Robert Moats Miller, "Methodism and American Society, 1900-1939," in *The History of American Methodism*, Vol. III edited by Emory Stevens Bucke (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 388-392.

⁶³May, *op. cit.*, 235; David Noble, *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 250.

the human person was primarily a moral and rational being and as such susceptible to moral suasion and thus able to realize the basic ideals of Christianity. Finally, while human beings were not necessarily perfectable, human nature was sufficiently plastic to allow for the creation of a new social order through individual, but especially societal influences. The result of the integration of experience with a liberal theological framework was an emphasis on the social dimensions of sin; the possibility of a building up of the Kingdom of God through cooperation and love. Love was understood as primarily love of one's neighbor and as such other directed. There stood at the heart of the social gospel an attempt to christianize society by reshaping social attitudes and institutions.⁶⁴

In a Methodist context the advocates of a social gospel became the conscience of the church by seeking an openness and hearing for those who were powerless and without a voice in the larger society. A coalition of social gospel proponents within the Methodist Episcopal Church emerged with the formation of the Methodist Federation for Social Service in 1907. The five individuals most responsible for its creations were Frank Mason North, corresponding secretary for the New York Evangelization Union, Worth Tippy, pastor of an inner-city parish in Cleveland, Ohio, Harry F. Ward, pastor of a working class parish in Chicago, Herbert Welch (later Bishop), President of Ohio Wesleyan University, and Robb Zarring, assistant editor of the *Western Christian Advocate*.⁶⁵ The Federation, until its ousting from the church during the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s, was the semi-official social action agency of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Under leadership of Bishop Francis McConnell, the Federation's President, and Harry F. Ward, the Federation's executive secretary, the Federation was for more than thirty years to advance a radical social gospel which was at the forefront of progressivism within the Methodist Episcopal Church in its confrontation with racism, the profit motive of capitalism, class exploitation, and American imperialism.⁶⁶ The distinctive aspect of the federation's social gospel radicalism was its sustaining criticism of capitalism as formulated by War.⁶⁷ He believed that the cornerstone of capitalism was the maximiza-

⁶⁴William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 164-174. May, *op. cit.*, 229-231. Robert C. White and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 254-272. Daniel D. Williams, *The Andover Liberals: A Study in American Theology* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1940), 154-170.

⁶⁵Donald K. Gorrell, "The Methodist Federation for Social Service and the Social Creed," *Methodist History* 13/2 (January, 1975), 4-7. William McGuire King, "The Emergence of Social Gospel Radicalism: The Methodist Case," *Church History* 50 (December 1981), 436-449.

⁶⁶George D. McClain, "Pioneering Social Gospel Radicalism: An Overview History of the Methodist Federation for Social Action," *Radical Religion* 5/1 (1980), 11-12.

⁶⁷Robert H. Craig, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Harry F. Ward," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 24 (Summer, 1969), 331-356.

tion of profit to the detriment of human needs and wants. Ward saw a basic contradiction between a gospel of service and sacrifice for others and an ethic of individualism and acquitiveness. Democracy and capitalism were for Ward as antithetical to each other as Christianity and capitalism. Freedom, equality, and justice were impossible within a class structured society which placed effective power beyond the range of those whose labor sustained a privileged and exploitative minority.⁶⁸

The Federation throughout its history sought to be a conscience for the church by raising issues and confronting problems which the church might wish otherwise to ignore. They ranged from the issues of unionization of church workers to the stance of the church on national and international questions. Harry F. Ward and other members of the Federation believed the church faced an option of continuing to be a church which "represents the vested interests of an organization in property, income, social prestige, political power" or a prophetic church which sided with the social struggles of oppressed people and thereby took upon itself, as Jesus, the possibility of its own death.⁶⁹

Conclusion

While populism is no more, the conditions which gave rise to populism remain. Rural poverty has not vanished and the poor are still subjected to exploitation and degradation.

The contradictions of a capitalist economy as they affect human beings can be seen in plant closings, a growing gap between rich and poor, and the increasing "feminization" of poverty.⁷⁰ For the majority of Americans who work for a living, if they have a job, there is "little or no control over the labor process, and [they are] wholly dependent for [their] welfare on the vicissitudes of the labor market."⁷¹ Socialism as a socio-political response for many is as viable an answer as it was over sixty years ago, but while socialism remains visible on the political horizon it lacks the mass base of the earlier Socialist Party. Social gospel radicalism of the Methodist Federation has undergone changes with a new generation who have found before them an agenda of confronting the interrelationship between race, class, and gender as they are embedded in a capitalist economy.

⁶⁸Harry F. Ward, *The Profit Motive: Is it Indispensable to Industry?* (New York: Lague for Industrial Democracy, 1924), 34. Harry F. Ward, *Democracy and Social Change* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1940), 60-76.

⁶⁹Ward, *Democracy and Social Change*, *op. cit.*, 90.

⁷⁰Michael Harrington, *The New American Poverty* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 207-229.

⁷¹Economic Analysis Working Group, Theologians Project, "The Failure of the American Dream," paper prepared for Theology in the Americas, Detroit II Conference, July 31-August 6, 1980, 17.

The contribution of Methodism, both popular and radical, is a recognition that one's identity as a Methodist is more the outcome of one's active participation in the process of the struggle for liberation than fidelity to a statistically conceived tradition. Much like its contemporary Latin American counterpart, to be a Methodist is to live a life of service to the poor and oppressed by actively engaging in the creation of a more humane and just social order.