

## Populism and the Crisis of American Methodism

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### Abstract

*A rich literature on ‘populism’ and ‘religion’ has flourished in the preceding decade. Following a now consensual vision of ‘populism’ as ‘anti-pluralism’, scholars such as Cas Mudde, Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, and Duncan McDonnell have homed in on how populists weaponize religious themes and live off the decline of organized religiosity. This paper revisits these theses through a re-examination of the first self-declared populist movement in history, the American People’s Party of the late nineteenth century and two of its most prominent political personalities – Georgia Populist Thomas E. Watson and Boston radical Benjamin O. Flower. Both Watson and Flower were convinced Methodists all their lives and saw Populist farming associations in the 1890s as a natural extension of previous church networks. After the movement’s defeat in 1896, however, both remodulated their Methodism for specific ends: anti-Catholicism, opposition to Protestant missionary efforts, anti-vaccination sentiment and, in case of Watson, aggressive anti-Semitism. Rather than seeing these instances as deviations from a populist creed, this paper investigates how Flower and Watson’s Populism saw the crisis of American Methodism as part of a broader republican decline, and how this insight can inform contemporary discussion on the interrelation between populism, pluralism, democracy, and religion.*

**Keywords:** Populism; American Methodism; American People’s Party

### Introduction

A rich literature on ‘populism’ and ‘religion’ has flourished in the preceding decade. Following a now consensual vision of ‘populism’ as ‘anti-pluralism’, scholars such as Cas Mudde, Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, and Duncan McDonnell have homed in on how populists weaponize religious themes and live off the decline of organized religiosity. This paper revisits these theses through a re-examination of the first self-declared populist movement in history, the American People’s Party of the late nineteenth century and two of its most prominent political personalities – Georgia Populist Thomas E. Watson and Boston radical Benjamin O. Flower. Both Watson and Flower were convinced Methodists all their lives and saw Populist farming associations in the 1890s as a natural extension of previous church networks. After the movement’s defeat in 1896, however, both remodulated their Methodism for specific ends: anti-Catholicism, opposition to Protestant missionary efforts, anti-vaccination sentiment and, in case of Watson, aggressive anti-Semitism. Rather than seeing these instances as deviations from a populist creed, this paper investigates how Flower and Watson’s Populism saw the crisis of American Methodism as part of a broader republican decline, and how this insight can inform contemporary discussion on the interrelation between populism, pluralism, democracy, and religion.

Often enough, however, this focus on the relationship between both phenomena has been narrowed to a discursive angle. How do populist actors use populist themes (or ‘hijack’ them), and how do they stigmatise other religious creeds? What kind of religious rhetoric do they use? Although these topics are worthy of our interests in and of themselves, they nonetheless sidestep some of the central issues

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that are implicit in the contemporary populist debate. This refers to the twin decline of both classical party democracy and religious practice in the last thirty years – something Olivier Roy has termed “a time of religion without culture.”

These visions of populism and religion follow naturally from a now dominant vision of populism as ‘anti-pluralism.’ After several decades of populism studies, each of the traditions within the field now share their own points of convergence and divergence. Taken together, however, they also exhibit a covert *consensus* on the nature of populism past and present. Firstly, all see populism as essentially opposed to political mediation and hostile to intermediary bodies such as parties, unions, or parliaments. This feature implies that populists prefer direct or plebiscitary democracy over parliaments or parties, which are seen as distortions of popular power. Secondly, populists are said to privilege a politics of identity over a politics of ‘interests’ or ‘issues’, preferring to unite a people around cultural rather than economic markers. Thirdly, today’s populism is cast as monistic. Populists adhere to a homogeneous vision of the people which is uniquely deserving of representation on a state level. Fourthly, populism is seen as more concerned with politics rather than policy. Fifthly, in all traditions, populism appears as particularly leader centric. Populism is dependent on leadership for its functioning, in keeping with its distaste for mediating structures. Its preconditions are tailored to this character: historically, this new mode of politics is said to arise out of the decomposition of party democracy in Europe in the last thirty years, with declining membership rates, increased volatility, and falling voter participation as its most acute symptoms. All in all, populism thus appears as the ideology of an increasingly ‘disorganized’ or ‘desociologized’ democracy, as Pierre Rosanvallon has recently termed it – a disorganization that has also spread to classical religious institutions, as scholars such Marcel Gauchet, Tobias Cremer, and Olivier Roy have insisted.<sup>2</sup>

The new consensus in populism studies is also conspicuous for what it leaves out, however – the late nineteenth-century American Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s, the activists who first introduced the term ‘populism’ into our political language. These original populists also hardly fit their Bonapartist story. Very wary of strong presidential power and executives, they first looked to civil society organizations for relief in the 1880s and then began to construct a legislative route to reform. In the 1880s and 1890s, Populists hoped that co-operative organizing, constitutional reform, and parliamentary pressure could save the farmers’ republic. Along the way, they also rethought the fundamentals of the American republican tradition, from concepts of federalism to parliamentary power to its definition of the ‘people’. And although they ran into the same problems as today’s ‘populists’ – issues of democratic representation, complexity, the exact boundaries of the ‘people’ – they took their answer in a distinctly different direction.<sup>3</sup>

All these characteristics makes American ‘big p’ Populism somewhat of a black swan event for the current literature. In the late nineteenth century, Populism itself was hardly conceived as a ‘revolt against intermediary bodies’ or anti-pluralist authoritarianism. Indeed, the late nineteenth-century movement that lend its name to the term– the American People’s Party– constructed a rich world of farmers’ clubs, cooperatives, colleges, and temperance societies. It was this ‘cooperative commonwealth’ that served as the basis of the Populist campaigns of 1892, 1894, and 1896 in which

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *L'avènement de la démocratie 4: Le Nouve Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017); Tobias Cremer, “Nations under God: How Church–State Relations Shape Christian Responses to Right-Wing Populism in Germany and the United States”, *Religions* 12:4 (2021), 254-255; Olivier Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance: Le temps de la religion sans culture* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens ‘Populism versus Democracy’, *Political Studies* 55 (2007), 405–424; Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi, *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021\*); Matthew Goodwin and Roger Eatwell (2018), *National Populism and the Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, London: Penguin; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme* (Paris: Seuil: 2020). Nadia Urbinati, *Me The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (New York: Harvard University Press. 2019).



the People's Party candidates came close to one-fifth of the presidential vote, and nearly tanked the Democratic Party in the South. Unlike today's digital parties, this populism was deeply deliberative. It built a rich campaign literature, had a large educational circuit, and sent out travelling Alliance lectures. This organizational effort continued to condition rural radicalism for a generation, culminating in the reforms of the New Deal and Progressive trustbusting. Contact with a base was not unmediated or direct. Rather, it was filtered through intricate procedures of selection on voting, modelled on the mass parties arising on the other side of the Atlantic.

America's populism also functioned as the natural outgrowth of previous Methodist networks. As historians such as Robert McMath and Charles Postel have noted, a large majority of American Populists came from overwhelmingly Protestant backgrounds, many of them reared in Southern churches. Its main meetings were modelled on revivalist religion. Its secret societies were called 'brotherhoods' and appropriated a whole list of religious practices. Many Populists also drew on previous currents in French associationist thought for this purpose, which saw the re-establishment of 'religion after religion' as the solution to the crisis of individualism that had overtaken post-Revolutionary France. As Michael Sonenscher noted, this notion of pluralism stipulated that a large "network of trusts and corporations" could "offset the more divisive consequences of economic inequality and the democratic deficit." Society as a system would then be a "unit made up of smaller units" and "the smaller units were parts of larger units but were also responsible for providing a range of more or less costly public services and amenities, such as roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, policing, parks or playgrounds."<sup>4</sup> This "network of trusts and corporations" with "their legal provisions on what they could or could not do with their assets, would reinforce the nexus of debt, income and expenditure and, at the same time, lock public and private finance into a single, loosely integrated system."<sup>5</sup>

This pluralism was the response to the decline of institutional religion as a source of social bonds. This discussion went back to French thinkers Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte's discussions of the possibility of a post-religious order in the early nineteenth-century. With the abolition of the estates in the 1789 revolution and the attack on state authority in the 1790s, French positivists asked themselves the question what kind of bonds might come to prop up a social order. As Michael Behrent noted, a new notion of 'association' could here bring succor. Although the old Christian corporations had been shattered by revolutionary turmoil and the church no longer stood at the center of French society, a new notion of 'associative' identity could compensate for this weakening of ecclesiastical authority. As Behrent notes:

The French Revolution's abolition of the old regime's corporate order bequeathed to post-revolutionary political thought a lingering question: how... could a measure of "organicity" be injected into "a society of individuals"? This question was particularly troubling for social republicans, precisely because they simultaneously embraced the revolution's emancipatory heritage and feared the centrifugal forces of individualism that it had unleashed. Because Catholicism had been so deeply imbricated in the old regime's corporate structure, they held religion to be an indispensable tool for theorizing social cohesion, even as they claimed that association had replaced corporation as the defining concept of the post-revolutionary order.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Michael Sonenscher, 'The Politics of Old Europe', *London Review of Books* (3 May 2019), p.10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Behrent, 'The Mystical Body of Society: Religion and Association in Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69:2 (2008), 219-43

This search for a ‘religion after religion’ continued to condition French political thought for the next century. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon hoped that a rekindled cooperative movement could restore the stability of the pre-1789 social order. Writers like Charles Baudelaire thought that only ultra-Montane Catholicism was reliable. Emile Durkheim hoped that modern ‘anomie’ could be stopped by a new socialism. The French fascist Drieu de La Rochelle said that he did not believe in God but “thought it crucial that people believed in him”. In the 1860s and 1870s, Proudhon and Comte’s notions of ‘association’ migrated into American political thought. Charles Macune, the main educator in the Alliance movement, was a keen reader of Proudhon; he later became a Methodist preacher.

Another prominent Methodist in the Populist coalition was the Georgia politician Thomas E. Watson, a follower of both John Wesley and Napoleon Bonaparte. Watson’s Bonapartism steadily clashed with one of the main obsessions of Watson’s later life: anti-Catholicism. From 1910 to his death in 1922, Watson cultivated an unremitting hostility to anything that remotely smacked of ‘Romanism.’<sup>7</sup> His 1912 tract on the ‘Roman hierarchy’ was published in the same year as the Frank controversy, based on a series began in 1910.<sup>8</sup> Watson himself stemmed from a bloodline of English Quaker settlers. They had emigrated in the mid-1700s, agitated by Old Whig sentiment and hostility against High Church haughtiness. Throughout the 1900s, Watson constantly worried about the capacity for American Protestantism to face up to the challenge of commercialisation and rising corporate power.<sup>9</sup> This problem mirrored the double-sided nature of money in Populist thought. Money was both necessary instrument of exchange and the assurance of a stable republic – it was the Gauls’ lack of a medium of exchange, after all, that had doomed them to the despotism of the druids and retarded their republican development. But money also contained a dangerous seed. Undone of its basis in labour and subject to monopoly, it became a raving source of republican instability. Watson’s Methodism also refused the option of a credentialed clergy. The twin threat of monetary involvement and monarchical centralisation clashed with Watson’s worries about republican corruption.

The clearest example of this corruption was their involvement in American missionary work. In 1912, Watson collected critiques of the missionary movement in the book *Foreign Missions Exposed*. ‘I wonder whether John Wesley’, he claimed, ‘ever dreamed that his Church would come to such a point of view... The sum and substance of the missionary demand is “beautiful and costly buildings, or we can’t do business.”’<sup>10</sup> Now, ‘without any scriptural authority’, Methodists had ‘committed our churches to the policy of going to such countries as Japan and China to compete with those governments in the secular education of their own children.’<sup>11</sup> Protestants’ inability to clarify their position vis-à-vis this matter furthered America’s imperial drift. ‘A whoop and hurrah it shouts’, he ended, “the world for Christ.” the Layman’s Movement really means, “the world for the Trusts”.<sup>12</sup> The People’s Party had already ended its career protesting the imperial adventures in Puerto Rico and Cuba, condemning them as ‘wars of conquest’ against ‘wars of humanity.’<sup>13</sup> Watson now used this anti-imperial rhetoric to criticise the Methodist Church. Yet while he wrote elegies to Napoleon’s

<sup>7</sup> See Brendan J. Buttimer, ‘Turning Away from Georgia toward Rome: The Diocese of Savannah and the Growth of the Anti-Catholic Movement in Georgia, 1870-1970’, *U.S. Catholic Historian* 21:4 (Fall, 2003), pp.17-35.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas E. Watson, *The Roman Catholic Hierarchy: The Deadliest Menace to American Liberties and Christian Civilization* (Thomson, GA: Jeffersonian Publishing Company, 1915).

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Rogal, *The Financial Aspects of John Wesley’s British Methodism (1720-1791)* (London: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p.1. For broader histories of Southern Methodism at the time, see Christopher H. Owen, *The Sacred Flame of Love: Methodism and Society in Nineteenth-century Georgia* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas E. Watson, *Foreign Missions Exposed* (Atlanta, GA: Press of the Jeffersonian, 1910), pp.61-62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>13</sup> See Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, p.86; Jessen, ‘Populism and Imperialism’, passim; Clanton, *Kansas Populism*, p.297.



'benevolent' imperialism, Watson protested every foreign policy decision with utmost ferocity and opposed budgetary increases for the navy.

Anti-imperialism was hardly Watson's privilege within the movement. No ex-Populist was more hostile to this development than the Boston publicist Benjamin O. Flower. Flower had always been an atypical member of the agrarian crusade. Born to a lineage of English Methodist ministers who settled in Illinois, he became the editor of *The Arena* in 1889. Flower observed the rural class struggles of the 1890s from afar and lacked reputation as a Midwestern muckraker.<sup>14</sup> Closeness to Washington, however, drew Flower into Populist circles. In the 1890s the magazine became a leading platform for the reform causes of the 1890s, from Social Gospel writings to women's suffrage agitation.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1890s Flower developed a keen interest in social problems and used his journalistic platform to this end. His 1893 *Civilization's Inferno*, for instance, worked off the template coined by Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, written out of indignation with East Coast slums (Flower repeatedly invoked Riis's writing<sup>16</sup>). Eastern cities were 'reservoirs of physical and moral death' and an 'enormous expense to the State', a 'reality whose shadow is at once colossal and portentous.'<sup>17</sup> Like writers such as Marx, Proudhon, and Considérant before him, Flower's 'study from the social cellar' applied the Dantesque canvas to the concentric circles of industrial society.<sup>18</sup> 'The city', Flower claimed, 'is the real inferno' – there was 'no need to wander into other worlds for hells of God's creating' since man had 'made an underworld before which the most daring imagination of poet or seer staggers.'<sup>19</sup>

In the 1890s Flower was also at the forefront of an ambitious republican reinvention movement. Like other classical republicans, he had started with a vision of small but universal landownership. This implied a population made up of male settler-citizens who refused any excessive mediation between society and state. As Flower acknowledged in the co-operative 1880s and 1890s, however, this vision had now run into severe limits. A new economy was being rewired around a corporate node. Proletarianisation was becoming an inescapable social fact, no longer a temporary station to landownership. 'Emergency measures' were thus required to 'maintained self-respecting manhood.'<sup>20</sup> This was the lesson he drew from investigative work in *Civilization's Inferno*, which contrasted Eastern slum dwellers with the old settlers of yore. 'Over their heads perpetually rests the dread of eviction, of sickness and of failure to obtain employment, making existence a perpetual nightmare.'<sup>21</sup> Flower remembered 'the great moral worth and intellectual independence' of the settler as a 'distinct gain to the young republic.'<sup>22</sup> The new immigrants, however, were a different affair: in a country where land was no longer 'plentiful and free', 'every incoming army from the slums of Europe must necessarily feed the fire which threatens the destruction of free government' into a 'Democracy of Darkness.'<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Louis Marin-Lamellet, 'Du Grand Réveil spirituel à une Nouvelle Réforme protestante. Benjamin O. Flower et les ambiguïtés du potentiel mobilisateur de la religion (1890-1918)', *Revue française d'études américaines* 4:141 (2014), pp.107-119.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165. Flower also offered publishing space to socialist theorists who circled around the coalition.

<sup>16</sup> See Flower, *Civilization's Inferno*, p.10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>18</sup> For other examples of this theme, see William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2016); Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp.242-243. See also Jean-Louis Marin-Lamellet, 'Gender and Imagined Purity of at the turn of the 20th century: the example of B.O. Flower, Reformer', *Nouveau Monde Mondes Nouveaux/Novo Mundo Mundos Novos* (2014), p.15. As Marin-Lamellet notes, Flower's book was 'part sociological survey based on fieldwork and statistical analysis, part *mise en scène* of poverty and a modern rewriting of Dante's circles of hell to shock readers into action.' (p.15) The book itself was based on a series of articles first published in *The Arena*.

<sup>19</sup> Flower, *Civilization's Inferno*, p.101.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, 'Emergency Measures Which Would Have Maintained Self-Respecting Manhood', *The Arena* 9 (May 1894), 822-826.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86; pp.97-99.

As ‘foreign cheap labor’ invaded the country, Americans were sinking into ‘the frightful social environment of this class.’<sup>24</sup> Flower’s *Inferno* did not openly advocate immigration restrictions, however, but rather hoped that public tenement works would avert pauperism and restore republican security, bulwarked by a set of ‘radical reformatory measures.’<sup>25</sup>

‘Republican simplicity’ had thus been transcended. Complexity had entered through the backdoor, supported by new monopolists and a tightening land supply. Competition had also been a force for good in earlier eras, Flower claimed. It maintained a balance between ‘passions’ and ‘interests’ and equalised production and consumption. Now it morphed into an openly destructive force. It pitted citizens against each other and introducing new artificial citizens. But there were options available in a new ‘age of association.’ The move from competition to co-operation was borne out of the reform movements of the 1890s, who themselves drew on the European experiments of the 1830s and 1840s. As *The Arena* still declared in 1903, co-operatives meant ‘union in place of conflict, harmony instead of antagonism’, ‘the diffusion of wealth’ where ‘buyer and seller are no longer opposed... in cooperative production the antagonism between labor and capital vanishes, for the workers and the capitalists are the same people.’<sup>26</sup>

This ‘age of co-operation’ naturally required a different model of citizenship. Previous republican theorists had relied on the image of the self-sufficient, male settler, who owned his homestead and engaged in spontaneous competition. This image had now been surpassed, but this did not mean America fell prey to an old republican cycle. Flower’s reading of Herbert Spencer cautioned against this view. Instead, it pulled him into a more progressive direction and marginalised older theories of republican cycles – the ‘high-water mark of every age’, *The Arena* claimed in 1904, ‘registered a distinct advance from the farthest upward reach of civilization in the preceding cycle.’<sup>27</sup>

As usual there was a racial component to Flower’s ‘evolutionary republicanism.’ *The Arena*’s claim was that the Anglo-Saxon races were providentially predisposed to free government.<sup>28</sup> It was ideally suited for a citizenry who were ‘virtuous, self-sacrificing and economically independent.’<sup>29</sup> While previous thinkers had often cast them as competitive and possessive, Flower now claimed that the values of Anglo-Saxon womanhood, ranging from co-operation to self-sacrifice, offered a reservoir for reinvention by mixing Spencer with Jefferson. Since woman was as ‘pure as the glistening snow-clad peaks in the midst of the moral degradation which taints manhood’, female Populists provided a bulwark against the competitive and ‘vicious spirit of the business world.’<sup>30</sup> American women had always been selfless subjects.<sup>31</sup> Female ‘exaltation’, Flower claimed, meant ‘the elevation of the race’, ‘a broader liberty and more liberal mood of justice’ and a ‘higher civilization.’<sup>32</sup> All ‘weighty and fundamental problems’ would thus never ‘be equitably adjusted until we have brought into political

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89. Such rhetoric was consonant with Ignatius Donnelly’s 1892 Omaha Platform. Populists there hoped that ‘all lands now owned by aliens should be reclaimed by the government and held for actual settlers only’ while it condemned the opening of ‘our ports to the pauper and criminal classes of the world and crowds out our wage-earners.’ See Pollack (ed.), *Populist Mind*, p.65.

<sup>25</sup> Flower, *Civilization’s Inferno*, p.230.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, ‘The Rise and Progress of Co-operation in Europe’, *The Arena* 30 (1903), p.546.

<sup>27</sup> Felicia Blake, ‘The Choice: *An Allegory*’, *The Arena* 13 (July-December 1904), p.542.

<sup>28</sup> See Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (New York: University of California Press, 2001), pp.188-194.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.184.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.191; Marin-Lamellet, ‘Gender and Imagined Purity’, pp.11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Michael L. Goldberg, *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas* (New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp.280-290; Richard Stiller, *Queen of Populists: The Story of Mary Elizabeth Lease* (New York: T.Y. Crowell and Company, 1970); Brooke Speere Orr, ‘The “people’s Joan of Arc”: Mary Elizabeth Lease, Gendered Politics and Populist Party Politics in Gilded-Age America’ (New York: Peter Lang, 2014); Gene Clanton, ‘Intolerant Populist? The Disaffection of Mary Elizabeth Lease’, *Kansas Historical Society* 24:2 (Summer 1968), pp.392-444.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.



and social life more of the splendid spirit of altruism', which stood out as the 'most conspicuous characteristic' of womanhood.<sup>33</sup>

This co-operative ambition faded with Populism's defeat. The Alliance's 'counter-monopoly' of cooperatives and exchanges had been shattered. Yet Flower could not reconcile himself to the new executive order that had grown in the wake of the Populist defeat. Progressivism summoned agencies and increased regulation, but it expanded state power precisely at the cost of popular representation. As he claimed in 1898, 'there are hundreds of thousands of people who believe most strongly in governmental ownership of the railway and telegraph, and who are resolute in their advocacy of the state and municipal ownership of those great monopolies', but who were 'unalterably opposed to governmental interference with the individual freedom of the citizen in the honorable pursuance of any lawful avocation.'<sup>34</sup> In 1904 Flower continued to speak of the 'Autocratic and Bureaucratic Usurpations of Legislative Functions by Executive Officials.'<sup>35</sup> This implied 'the rise of that most fatal form of despotism – bureaucracy.'<sup>36</sup> Populism had already been a 'a revolt of the millions against the assumption of paternal authority on the part of the general government.'<sup>37</sup> But the move away from 'Congressional government' continued to breed a caste of rulers untouched by popular recall, governing without representing.<sup>38</sup> This executive 'coup' had begun with the Civil War and culminated in the creation of the first agencies meant to administer veterans' pensions. Although these had been acceptable, the new agencies of the 1900s were a perversion of progress. Flower compressed this in a sketch:

History teaches no more impressive or suggestive lesson than that injustice, oppression, and corruption sooner or later follow the lodgment of arbitrary and tyrannical power in the hands of rulers or executive officials, not directly responsible to the voters.... Sooner or later such arbitrary leads to abuses which work great wrong and materially retard civilization. The circumstance that for a time officials exercising such dangerous prerogatives may not abuse them, because they themselves are broad in spirit, honorable, clean and just, does not affect the issue; because such exemplary individuals or rulers are not always to be found in responsible official positions, and the only safeguard of human rights, justice, progress and freedom lies in the people declaring in no uncertain voice that all much authority shall remain where it constitutionally belongs – with the legislative department of the government, where the representatives are directly responsible to the voters, and where a law can only be enacted after it has been fully discussed.<sup>39</sup>

A desire for publicity had already informed Populists' distrust of commissions in the 1870s. These were accused of providing a pipeline to corporations, who could subsequently staff them with personnel. Flower reiterated these objections in 1904, but now added a more comprehensive critique of executive power. 'Since corporate power has gained control of the partisan machines of both great parties', the corporation had taken 'the governing power as much as possible away from the electorate

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.149.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, 'Pure Democracy versus Vicious Governmental Favoritism', *The Arena* 8 (1898), pp.260-272.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, 'Autocratic and Bureaucratic Usurpations of Legislative Functions by Executive Officials', *The Arena* 31 (1904), p.629.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.629.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, 'Editorials', *The Arena* 8 (March 1893), p.261.

<sup>38</sup> See Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1914).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.638.

and their representatives in the law-making department and augment[ed] the power of executives, of bureaux, and of officials in appointed positions.<sup>40</sup>

Connected to this preferred ‘directness’ was a specific theory of Catholic and corporate power – an ‘anti-Catholic affect’, as Carl Schmitt would later term it.<sup>41</sup> In the early 1900s, Flower increasingly began to couple his anti-corporatism to the presence of the Catholic church in American public life. Corporations had gained supremacy when the nation was riven with a partisan conflict. This was visible in the potlatch of land grants handed out by the Lincoln administration.<sup>42</sup> In the late 1890s Flower still clung the possibility that the ‘principles of the trusts’ and corporate personality could be recuperated for the reform cause.<sup>43</sup> The rural co-operative movement and labour co-partnerships provided the necessary levers for this task. In the 1900s, however, these efforts seemed less secure. Rather than the ‘people’ crafting its own corporations, corporations were simply remodelling the state in their image, rather than nakedly buying out governors. With its passive membership, parasitic trusteeship, and democratic deficit, corporations were not just politically odious; they also privatised expertise and alienated citizens from their society’s centres of decision-making. Professionalisation made it difficult for citizens to acquire the information to run organisations. Led by new professionals and ‘experts’ (the term rapidly gained currency from 1900 to 1920) the new middle classes provided the manpower for the ‘officialdom’ which Flower lamented.<sup>44</sup> But their newfound faith in expertise, Flower saw, implied robbing ‘the people of the right and benefit of personally testing the virtue or truth of the newer systems or methods.’<sup>45</sup>

A 1908 editorial for *The Arena* followed up on this reproach. To Flower, ‘one of the gravest perils to good government under constitutional rule’ was ‘the attempt on the part of officials to secure desired ends or necessary reforms with due regard to constitutional provisions.’<sup>46</sup> Anticatholic sentiment again played a prominent role in this anti-corporate strand. As the world’s first bureaucracy, the Catholic church had always prided itself on its corporate status. It also functioned as a counterweight to temporal power, weakening popular control over the state and parcelling up its sovereignty. And just like Catholics would always owe fealty to the Holy See over their national governments (an argument traceable to Locke and earlier Protestant thinkers), corporations lessened their citizens’ attachment to states. The set-up of the Catholic church was also heavily hierarchical, centred on a priesthood with an interpretive monopoly over scripture and a papal monarch who commanded officials.<sup>47</sup> Corporations now reproduced this Catholic set-up in the state, ‘Romanising’ a previously republican order. New priests mediated state policy, monopolised expertise, and disparaged older epistemic communities under their rule.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.639. See Christopher Lasch, ‘The Decline of Populism’, in *The Agony of the American Left*, p.56. Both these objections had clear precedents in Populist thinking. Authors such as Ignatius Donnelly, for instance, had already advocated alternative science in the 1880s and 1890s, countering an increasingly professionalised academic sector.

<sup>41</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), passim.

<sup>42</sup> Walter M. Brasch, *Forerunners of Revolution: Muckrakers and the American Social Conscience* (New York: University Press of America, 1990), pp.15-16.

<sup>43</sup> Marin-Lamellet, ‘What’s the Matter’, p.7. For a representative example, see Henry Demarest Lloyd, *Labor Copartnership: Notes of a Visit to Co-operative Workshops, Factories and Farmers in Great Britain and Ireland, in which Employer, Employé, and Consumer Share in Ownership, Management and Results* (London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1898).

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, *Progressive Men, Women and Movements in the Past Twenty-Five Years* (Boston: The Arena, 1914), pp.126-127

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.300.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, ‘The Popular Reaction Against Extreme Centralization’, *The Arena* 39 (1908), p.217.

<sup>47</sup> See Jacob Henry Dorn, *Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th Century America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp.2-3.

<sup>48</sup> See Jean-Louis Marin-Lamellet, ‘Who Is to Decide Who the Medical Charlatans Are?': “Medical Freedom” and Scientific Expertise in the USA in the 1910s’, eds. Véronique Molinari and Cyril Besson, *Using and Abusing Science: Science and Political Discourse from Burke’s ‘French Revolution’ to Obama’s Science Fair* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), pp.81-90.



Flower's anti-Catholic feelings only heightened after he left *The Arena* in 1915 for the Missouri weekly *The Menace*. The magazine was founded by erstwhile Progressive Wilbur Franklin Phelps, known as one of the vocal voices of 'anti-Romanism' in the United States, rivalling Watson's *The Magazine*.<sup>49</sup> (In the same year, Flower had publicly supported Watson as a 'fair-minded thinker' who had exposed the danger of foreign missions.<sup>50</sup>) Although it had antecedents in the Know Nothings of the 1850s, Flower's new anti-Catholicism was driven both by increased Catholic immigration and the 'outlet for expectations which progressivism raised and then failed to fulfil.<sup>51</sup> Instead of the economic monopoly, the religious 'trust' was the new bulwark of corporate privilege. Flower, for instance, saw his mission as 'dealing with the irrepressible conflict between two mutually exclusive world theories of government; a compendium of facts, historical data, reasons and present-day chronicles, showing why every friend of fundamental democracy must oppose politico-ecclesiastical Romanism in its un-American campaign to make America "dominantly Catholic."<sup>52</sup>

One of Flower's chief nemeses here was 'the Catholic war on public education.'<sup>53</sup> Just as the free incorporation regime had liberated trusts from state control, Catholics now sought institutions that would not follow a nationally deliberated curriculum. This created a serious peril to republican citizenship. Catholic schools, he claimed, would 'wall off children and 'teach them the dogmatic creeds which separate and antagonize, instead of bringing together the living units on one great body.'<sup>54</sup> Antimonopolism was again a driving force of this argument, but no longer in an exclusively economic setting. As Jean-Louis Marin-Lamellet notes, Flower's new populism thus did 'not... trump his economic agenda' – rather, it applied 'radical antimonopoly traditions to economic *and* cultural problems with a critique of private corporations, government bureaucracies, and machine-like religious organizations.'<sup>55</sup>

Flower's anti-executive writing culminated in his founding of the National League for Medical Freedom in 1910. Launched by Flower and a string of other reformers, the objective of the league was to combat the 'monopolisation' of American medicine in the hands of professionals which had been gathering steam since the early 1900s. It had concrete legislative causes. In 1910, the Democratic Senator Owen from Oklahoma introduced a so-called 'Owen Bill' to establish a federal Department of Health.<sup>56</sup> Coming up to the bill, state medical societies had begun to reorganise the profession and claimed new cultural hegemony over medical affairs through licensing, certificates, and patents.<sup>57</sup> The Owen Bill evinced a similar ambition. Hailed as Progressivism's great plan for 'socialized medicine', the American Medical Association had also begun to strengthen its grip on medical practice in the early 1900s in a 'move to monopoly.'<sup>58</sup> Other foci included mass vaccination campaigns, stipulation of certificates and, above all, an assault on alternative medicine.

<sup>49</sup> Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, p.180.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, *The Patriot's Manual, Dealing with the Irrepressible Conflict Between Two Mutually Exclusive World Theories of Government: A Compendium of Facts, Historical Data, Reasons and Present-day Chronicles, Showing why Every Friend of Fundamental Democracy Must Oppose Politico-ecclesiastical Romanism in Its Un-American Campaign to Make America "dominantly Catholic"* (Baltimore: Free Press Defense League, 1915), p.150.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.179. See Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), for an overview of political critiques of Catholicism.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Marin-Lamellet, 'Whats the Matter', p.10.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, 'Why Rome Wars on the Public Schools', *The Menace* (18 December 1915), p.4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4. See also Jean-Louis Marin-Lamellet, "'What is the cocoon but a dark cabinet?'" Benjamin O. Flower, Print Culture and the Legitimation of Fringe Science in the 1890s', *Mémoires du livre* 6 (December 2014), 1-40.

<sup>56</sup> See James Burrow, *AMA: Voice of American Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), pp.97-99.

<sup>57</sup> See Paul Starr, 'The Consolidation of Professional Authority, 1850-1930', in *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise of a Sovereign Profession and the Making of a Vast Industry* (London: Hachette, 2017); Beatrix Hoffman, *The Wages of Sickness: The Politics of Health Insurance in Progressive America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> James Burrow, *Organized Medicine in the Progressive Era: The Move to Monopoly* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

Flower's League quickly drew former Populist support. Their 1892 candidate James B. Weaver joined the crusade, together with ex-Senator William W. Allen.<sup>59</sup> 'Makers of patent medicines, adulterators of drugs, and practitioners of the cults of mental and osteopathic healing', *The New York Times* proclaimed in May 1910, 'are up in arms.'<sup>60</sup> The League, in their view, had 'persuaded a few well-intentioned but misled individuals to join them', thereby opposing 'the efforts of practically all the reputable physicians in the country to consolidate the agencies of public health at Washington into one efficient department or bureau.'<sup>61</sup> In the same month, the *Washington Times* placed an advert for the organisation under the title 'Do You Want the "Doctors' Trust" to be able to Force its Opinions on You?' As the add claimed:

Do you want government by political doctors? When doctors disagree so constantly, should your choice be abridged by law, or by the ruling of a Department or Bureau? Do you want your health and hygiene to be regulated by an army of United States inspectors under the direction of a medical bureau?... If you want the federal government to continue to attend to its own business, the states to continue to attend theirs and the political doctors to theirs, join this League.<sup>62</sup>

An anti-therapeutic ethos also permeated the League's literature. Flower had already used the publishing space offered by *The Arena* to advertise a rich range of alternative medical approaches. He had also acted as president for the R. C. Flower Medicine Company from 1885 to 1889, earning a reputation as a 'notorious quack' for selling potions and elixirs.<sup>63</sup> From 1889 onwards, Flower's *Arena* supported hypnotism, mesmerism, telepathy as 'exiled truths.'<sup>64</sup>

A particular source of worry were public vaccination campaigns. Given its overlap with eugenicist currents and conventionally unsafe implementation (campaigns were often forced on poorer neighbourhoods, with little guarantee of success), vaccination represented the most glaring instance of a professionalism run amok. Vaccines, Flower claimed, was 'the vital question' of the early twentieth century, a fight to 'preserve the rights of the people from the most dangerous monopoly-seeking class in our land to-day.'<sup>65</sup> Anticatholicism again played a paramount role in his turn. In his texts, Flower compared new medical professionals to the 'clergy of the dark ages' jealous of popular medicine and thus expressed a 'convenient cry of prejudice and ignorance – quack, impostor, charlatan' to silence medical dissenters.<sup>66</sup> Professionals thus imported 'paternalistic measures' from 'the dying despotisms of the Old World' and 'fastened (them) upon our statute books' with the 'audacity of law-fortified trusts, monopolies and class-protected professions.'<sup>67</sup> Freedom of medical practice went together with the freedom of association. The latter had driven Populist reform in the 1890s and continued to safeguard republican liberty. Now, however, an 'elite group of physicians'

<sup>59</sup> See Marin-Lamellet, 'Who Is to Decide', p.82.

<sup>60</sup> Editorial, 'Medical Freedom', *The New York Times* (May 18, 1910), p.10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10. It was this biopolitical 'dispossession of decision-making' that bothered Flower so thoroughly, and how it crowded out popular actors out of the field of expertise.

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, 'Do You Want the "Doctors' Trust" to be able to Force Its Opinions on You?', *Washington Times* (May 19, 1910), page unknown. See also Benjamin O. Flower, 'The Battle for Medical Freedom', *Twentieth Century* 4 (1911), pp.656-657.

<sup>63</sup> Louis Filler, *The Muckrakers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p.342.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.6-12.

<sup>65</sup> Cited in Karen L. Wolloch, *The Antivaccine Heresy: Jacobson V. Massachusetts and the Troubled History of Compulsory Vaccination in the United States* (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), p.113; Robert D. Johnston, *The Politics of Healing: Histories of Alternative Medicine in Twentieth-century North America* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), pp.23-25. See also Robert D. Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), for a broader overview of how Midwestern Populists fared in the Progressive era and their resistance to bureaucratic variants of reform.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin O. Flower, 'Editorial Notes: An Object Lesson in Freedom', *The Arena* 3 (1891), p.508.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.511-512.



sought to restrict access to the state and gear it to narrow corporate interests.<sup>68</sup> It was difficult to find better evidence that Flower's Populism had moved from economics to culture, trading the doctors' trust for the business corporation.

Watson and Flower thus offer us a unique vista on the nexus between populism, democracy, and organized religion in the 'First Gilded Age'. Like populists today, both saw their movement as an attempt to reinvent the mediating structures of classical religiosity which had been destabilized by a centrifugal individualism. Like populists today, they combined a language of popular empowerment, autocratic rule, and a critique of expertise. Unlike populists today, however, Watson and Flower only shifted to these positions after the failure of Methodism to adapt to a new popular radicalism, and an attempt to create intermediary structures in the agrarian cooperative. Like Watson, Flower had supported the co-operative crusade of the 1880s and 1890s and hoped that it could reconcile an older settler republicanism with the new industrial corporation. Once this effort failed, they looked for other solutions to republican instability in anti-Catholicism, antivaccinationism, and Bonapartist dictatorship. While Watson openly defended Jim Crow, Flower became an extreme anti-statist and opposed the rise of discretionary government in the Progressive era – a form of 'crypto-popery.' He later joined Watson in his anti-Catholic campaign. Both thinkers thus looked to older and more idiosyncratic solutions to the problem of republican instability after the final triumph of corporate capitalism; their rethinking of Methodism, in short, was the most explicit symptom of a populist crisis that still echoes today.

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<sup>68</sup> Walloch, *The Antivaccine Heresy*, p.113.

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