At the time of his death in 1922, Tom Watson of Georgia symbolized for millions of Americans the most implacable hatreds which afflicted the nation during a high age of public violence and verbal aggression against minority groups. Among the more bizarre anti-Catholic charges made in Watson's several magazines were the grave accusation that the White House under Taft became "little more than an annex of the Vatican," the somber warning that "Popish conspirators" could at a moment's notice place the city of Washington at their mercy by stationing artillery batteries on the Georgetown heights, and the flow of alarmed reports that the "hierarchy" had hidden stores of guns, subverted newspapers, and won the first battle in a war with the U.S. Navy by making one ship "completely Popish." Revelations such as these may tempt the modern reader to dismiss Watson as a political clown or a clumsy demagogue, but the man had little humor and his articles gave passionate voice to the very real and intense hostilities of many millions of white Protestants.

Thus, authentic fanaticism rather than mere provincial buffoonery motivated Watson's tirades against the Pope as "Jimmie Cheesie," or the "fat old dago" who lived with "voluptuous women," his "open letters to Cardinal Gibbon expressing "my loathing for that stupid, degrading faith of yours," and his vehement denunciations of "foot kissers" and "bull-necked convent keepers" who placed so many women "behind the bars of convent dungeons . . . at the mercy of priests." Clearly Watson liked to mix political rage with Protestant pornography: between 1906 and 1922 he published articles under titles such as "The Sinister Portent of Negro Priests," "How Confession is Used . . . To Ruin Women," and "One of the Priests Who Raped a Catholic Woman." In these articles Watson repeatedly stressed the "doctrine" that "the priest can do no wrong" and the "belief" of Catholic women that obedience to a seducing priest was obedience to God.¹

If Watson neglected the Catholic "political menace" to dwell on the "sexual crimes" of the clerics, he almost completely forgot the political and social evils of "the Jewish money power" in his obsession with "the lascivious Jew" during the Leo Frank case. In 1913 Frank, the manager of an Atlanta pencil factory, was convicted on the flimsiest evidence by a mob-dominated court of the murder of a fourteen-year-old factory employee named Mary Phagan. Watson took up the case in 1914 when it seemed clear to a great many informed Americans that Frank had not been given a fair trial. In a lengthy series of articles Watson described the case as one more sinister instance of a rich and
perverted Jew who attempted to corrupt and then murdered a poor working-class Gentile girl. Frank was described as “the typical young libertine Jew” with “a ravenous appetite for the forbidden fruit — a lustful eagerness enhanced by the racial novelty of a girl of the uncircumcised.” Frank’s photograph with “the bulging satyr eyes . . . the fearfully protruding sensual lips . . . the animal jaw” revealed him as a “lascivious pervert” guilty of the crimes of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Nazi press of the thirties could have taken cues from the hundreds of pages which Watson wrote on the “animal” sexuality and the “unspeakable lusts” of Frank, and the “crumpled, frail white form,” the “ravaged innocence,” and the “torn garment spotted with the virginal blood” of Mary Phagan. This frenzied rhetoric reached new peaks of hysteria during 1915 when John M. Slayton on his last day as governor commuted Frank’s sentence to life imprisonment. Watson, in some of his most venomous writing, repeatedly demanded vengeance until mobs drove Slayton from the state and killed Frank. After the leaders of the mob that had lynched Frank and mutilated his body telephoned Watson to make a personal report, he composed an eight-page apologia for the lynching which he published under the title “THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE IS THE VOICE OF GOD.” A chorus of national protest merely drew from Watson a threat to organize a second Ku Klux Klan for “the purity of white women” and “true home rule.” (As Watson wrote, the initial organizational efforts for the second Klan were being launched.)

In 1909 the ever watchful and inventive Watson extended his pursuit of the demons of perverse politics and sexuality from the churches to radical politics. During previous years Socialism had drawn both praise and damnation from him, but now he declared open warfare on Marxist ideology as an explosive threat to political and sexual order. Watson warned his readers first of all not to assume that the need for public ownership of utilities and control of the railroads challenged the “fact” that private property was “just” and “sacred” and that the iron rule of free competition reigned as “the law of life.” Americans in particular were advised to tremble before the terrible evils which would follow the triumph of socialistic “free love and collectivism” because such an implacable enemy of “Caucasian civilization” would “devour” the home, “kill all that is purest and best in Christianity,” and destroy society by bringing equality to both sexes and all races. Worst of all, socialism could not “make a white woman secure from the lust of the Negro” and would in fact reduce all women to the level of sexual depravity.

Repeatedly, Watson belabored the evils of socialism, mangled Marxist concepts, and took Marxist irony with rustic literalness until Daniel DeLeon described the “sage of Hickory Hill” as “an unconscious humorist” and “the Junker behind which the capitalist hides.” For all practical purposes Watson confirmed DeLeon’s charges by asserting the superiority of “the ideals of the old South” to socialist ideology and in “exposing” Marxists as “Goths, Huns, and Vandals who lust for loot.” Lest any doubt remain in his reader’s mind about the wickedness of socialism and all its defenders, Watson stressed the “racial” backgrounds of Marx and Engels and hinted darkly at Jewish conspiracy. Moreover,
the most sinister Jewish and atheistic socialists came to the United States with the "mongrel hordes" of Southern and Eastern Europe to join an immigrant population which even without the radicals was "a huge mass of living dynamite" that threatened to destroy the nation.3

Despite the frequency and intensity of Watson's attacks on radicals and immigrants, Catholics and Jews, he often made it clear to his readers that the worst social evils and the ultimate threat to the Republic came from Black people. He directed a constant tirade of hatred and scornful vituperation against Black people for their "animality," "innate stupidity," "inhuman ugliness," "lascivious sexual habits," "inability to understand religion," and so on. Usually even ultra-racist whites liked to play the verbal game of swapping mawkish tales about their "old black mammys," but Watson attacked the habit of using Black nurses as a cruel surrender of helpless white children to the torments and tortures of these "lustful, brutal, and besotted" women with their "root and branch" hatred of the white family. The Black male fared even worse at the hands of Watson, who insisted on the frequent use of brute force to "control" Negroses and on flogging, if for no other reason, than for "their color and their smell." The realities of power counted for little to a man obsessed by a sadistic need to jeer at the powerless and by the compulsive promptings of a brutishly provincial mind to rub salt in the sorest emotional wounds.

Even though Georgia Blacks began the century almost devoid of political power, Watson offered with increasing fanaticism his developing plans for more and more political repression to "solve" the "Negro problem." In 1906 he helped lead a campaign to disfranchise the small number of Blacks who voted in the unimportant general election because of the "need" to "FIGHT THE HIDEOUS, OMINOUS MENACE OF NEGRO DOMINATION." When Watson cited lynching "bees" and race riots in which men died as a result of his reckless demagoguery, he turned away all criticism with the retort that these forms of racial aggression were "essential to white civilization" and standing proof that "justice yet lives among the people." Never did he admit personal blame or guilt, not even when his ruthless agitation helped to stir up the Atlanta race riot of 1906 which left more than two dozen Black men dead and many hundreds of persons wounded.4

Recollections of Watson and his fierce animosities still lingered in 1938 when C. Vann Woodward published Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel, a biographical study which provided the scholarly world with a lucid report on a little known area of American history. Although the closing chapters gave the reader unsettling glimpses of Watsonian hatred and bigotry, the book was a generally favorable account with introductory chapters marked by quiet sympathy for young Watson and middle chapters devoted to the discovery of a political hero of the Populist era who seemingly differed from the evil genius of the Progressive period as much as day departs from night. In Woodward's book the bloodthirsty bigot of 1909 or 1915 stood in the shadows and left the center of the political stage to a Populist leader with extraordinarily democratic impulses and wide human sympathies who was "perhaps the first native white Southern leader to treat Negro aspirations with the seriousness that human strivings deserve."
In the presence of a vivid portrait of a gallant reformer in pursuit of a humane bi-racial society, the image of the lynch advocate and political pornographer faded very rapidly. The newly resurrected Populist Watson, who insisted that "the accident of color" could "make no difference in the interests of farmers, croppers, and laborers," was shown pointedly warning his black and white audiences of the ruling conspiracy to keep the races apart in order to "fleece" them separately. Presumably, it took great courage to teach such doctrines in the unique atmosphere of violence and terror which marked the Georgia elections of the eighteen nineties. The defiant Watson, according to Woodward, served one of his finest hours in the election of 1892, defying both the Democratic establishment and a lynch mob to shelter on his own farm a Black supporter, the Reverend H. S. Doyle, with ample assistance from hundreds of Populist farmers dramatically recruited by torchlight in the middle of the night from all over the central part of the state.

Thus, Woodward conjured up from the same man an admirable Populist Dr. Jekyll and a demonic Mr. Hyde of the Progressive period. Many persons might feel that Hyde made Jekyll something less than the perfect material for heroism, but Woodward's reaction was just the opposite. He hinted that Jekyll's existence made Hyde less obnoxious by quoting in the preface to the biography an anonymous reader who remarked that "I feel a little unhappy over having come through those [last] chapters with so kindly a feeling toward Watson." Essentially, it seemed Watson was a good and brave man undone by "impersonal forces of economics and race and historical heritage" which "thwarted at every turn his courageous struggle" and "led him into the futility and degeneration of his later career." Yet, for all the confidence displayed in the preface and the book itself, Woodward's explanations about the demonic transformation of Jekyll are less satisfactory than those provided by Robert Louis Stevenson for his tale.

The problem of interpreting Watson according to Woodward's conceptions is made even more vexing by the fact that the man's political career prior to 1892 adds more to the image of Hyde than to the portrait of Jekyll. Woodward attempted to avoid this conclusion by stressing Watson's attacks on the railroads and on the convict lease system, but a substantial number of conservative politicians took similar positions and Watson's few gestures on these issues certainly did not constitute a "Preface to Rebellion." During the eighties Watson spent much of his public energy in developing the conservative themes of the "professional Southerner" rather than in fighting for reform politics. In this role he celebrated the nostalgic dream of Eden in "the old time" slave South and denounced New South publicists as "unpaternal" and "patricidal" traitors who offered "abject submission" and "sycophancy" to the North. Any "patriot" would feel shame for "Southern men who go to Northern Banquets and glory in our defeat." As a member of the planter class by birth and one of the largest exploiters of oppressed labor in the state, Watson shared the obsessions of his peers in a hatred of Reconstruction and Black aspirations and in a consistent devotion to white supremacy. Nothing in his career prior to 1890 would lead one to suspect him of racial heresy or a radical future.

In discussing the eighties and early nineties Woodward traced
Populist “rebellion” to two primal antecedents: the history of “the game Independent” and “the tradition of the Lost Cause.” He also gave a sympathetic presentation to Watson’s racist glorification of plantation life and slavery, and even went so far as to describe this “vision of agrarian bliss” as a major cause of Watson’s individual “rebellion.” We are assured that in the eighties “the first expression of his agrarianism . . . found utterance in the Confederate creed, and was indistinguishable from the doctrine of Robert Toombs and C. C. Jones,” and that after the election of 1896 “the next step was the rehabilitation of the Lost Cause.” It is important to note that “Confederate creed” and quotation marks as descriptive phrases, and that the allegedly radical Watson is coupled with the clearly reactionary and ultra-racist Toombs. Even more unacceptable is the description of antebellum planters as “old agrarian rebels” and the new Populist “rebels” as their descendants. (The 1880s, we are told, “afforded no role for the agrarian rebel whether a Bob Toombs . . . or a Tom Watson.”)

Part of the problem can be traced to Woodward’s use of “agrarian,” a term which spread confusion in the days of Charles Beard and even earlier. If the term means rural and can be applied to Peruvian feudal landlord or Russian collective farmer, its meaning is so general as to be of limited utility. Clearly, however, many historians have meant much more than “rural” and some scholars have even assigned to men as devoid of basic democratic values as the Toombs, the Calhouns, and the Fitzhughs the task of defending “agrarian democracy” or “Jeffersonian democracy” against the rapacious onslaughts of American capitalism during the ante-bellum and Civil War eras. Aside from noting the general multiplicity of meanings and misunderstandings that “agrarian” invokes, we must also remember that Tom Watson was written during the heyday of Southern debate in the thirties about “agrarianism.” The word meant much to the “Nashville Agrarians” when Robert Penn Warren openly defended the Southern order of segregation and racial repression and Frank Owsley dismissed slavery as unimportant and attributed the Civil War to the aggressive “ego-centric sectionalism” of the Yankees. The Nashville group presented the “best” of Southern “agrarian culture” as a source of alternatives to the allegedly coarse and offensive materialism of modern industrial society. The impact of the debate went far beyond the Nashville circle, and Woodward like other Southern white scholars seems to have been led by this trend of thought into racist conceptions of Southern history. Of course it would be absurd to remonstrate with a scholar for interpretations so commonplace in the thirties, but we must now recognize that Woodward’s account of the debate of Populists and Democrats failed to recognize the racist implications inherent in terminology such as “the Lost Cause,” the slavemaster as “rebel,” the slave plantation as “agrarian bliss,” and the distinctions between “political equality” and “social equality.” Even if equality and freedom could be divided, we must remember that in fact Southern white politicians of the post-Civil War era invented the rhetoric for racist reasons. Compelled for the moment to accept Black voting and office-holding (“political equality”), they devised the distinction and classified many basic human rights as “social equality” (equal access to adequate schools and
lence patterns public years, forced "non-native cal not pathological state of mind" and quoted a Watson letter seeking medical advice about "a baffling nervous trouble." However, Woodward did not pursue his doubts very far and soon dropped the line of psychological explanation entirely.8

Once Woodward even went so far as to express bewilderment about Watson's rabid Negrophobia. ("How Watson managed to reconcile his radical democratic doctrine with a proposal to disfranchise a million citizens of his native state is not quite clear.") On the whole, however, Watson's hatred of Blacks seemed more understandable than his scorn for other minority groups and Woodward accepted several of the essentially racist explanations offered by Watson himself.9 Watson, it seemed, turned against the Blacks because his efforts to create a bi-racial party failed and the Democrats used intimidation, bribery and ballot box stuffing to "steal" elections from Populists. One might suppose that since white politicians corrupted the polls and used terror and bribery to gain votes they could be trusted even less than the Black victims, but neither Watson nor Woodward reached this conclusion.

The Watson-Woodward account of the origins of Watson's Negrophobia merely provided another stereotype which served the same function as "Negro domination" or "carpetbagger" in guiding men away from genuine explanation and toward racist rhetoric. In truth, Populists as well as Democrats violated state election laws, stuffed ballot boxes, and bribed and intimidated Black voters. Seldom, if ever, did fully honest elections take place in the South during this era. (The old post-Reconstructon tale which contrasted the inherently and inevitably "corrupt and purchasable black vote" with the "honest," "responsible," and "civilized" white electorate was another white supremacy myth.) Civic corruption has been commonplace in American politics, but it is doubtful that many political factions exceeded the corruption of Southern white supremacy regimes of the eighties and nineties. Ironically enough, Black voters during this period when given even the rudiments of political choice often voted their own interests with surprising rationality despite the violence, fraud, and intimidation.

In all fairness to Woodward, the racist assumptions inherent in his explanation of Watson's "disillusionment" with Black political partici- pation must be examined in the milieu of the nineteen thirties. At a time when historical scholarship was heavily burdened with racist assumptions, Woodward expressed sympathy for Black aspirations in a volume which turned out to be one of the most perceptive studies of the decade.
The pervasiveness of white supremacy opinions during the thirties is to be measured less by the tendency of Americans to "demonstrate" the wickedness of Reconstruction with citations from obvious works of excess such as Claude G. Bowers' *The Tragic Era* (1929) than by the willingness of Samuel Eliot Morison and other sophisticated and urbane scholars to assure a generation of students that "Sambo" suffered less from "the peculiar institution" than his master did. An even better barometer for the prevailing climate of opinion was Paul Buck's Pulitzer prize-winning book, *The Road to Reunion* (1937), which deplored the "failure" of North and South to reunite after the Civil War and rejoiced over a reconciliation of Northern and Southern whites in the eighteen nineties which was won at the expense of Black freedom.

While Woodward absorbed some contemporary racist assumptions, he also shared with other scholars the reform leanings which were so commonplace in the age of the New Deal. A strong interest in Watson's alleged call for a bi-racial reformation of society sprang naturally from the political aspirations of an era in which the prospects for general reform and for the alleviation of racial oppression seemed better than they had for more than a generation. Although Franklin D. Roosevelt gave explicit sanction to the Southern caste system and allowed officials to maladminister Federal and state programs according to the dictates of white supremacy, Black people nevertheless gained more from the New Deal than from any regime since Reconstruction. Moreover, regional experiments in bi-racial reform such as new Southern unions for workers and sharecroppers gave added reasons to anticipate a brighter future for both races. It must have seemed helpful for the cause of that small but significant band of New Deal liberals with a commitment to racial justice to have political ancestors such as Tom Watson and a Populist historical precedent which brought millions of Blacks and whites to the common quest for a new social order. Seemingly, Watson both continued the best of Southern traditions and offered Southerners the chance to escape the worst provincial vices to join a national search for social reconstruction. Finally, this vision of Watsonian Populism had great utility for a scholar like Woodward who seemed to be trying to salvage a humane sense of regional identity from the wreckage which the lynchings, the harsh economic oppression, and the bitter politics of racial repression all seemed to have made of Southern history since Reconstruction.

To place Woodward's book more precisely in context, it is essential to remember that during the thirties most scholars either lacked reliable information or held distorted ideas about post-Civil War Southern history. Racist ideology provided the very foundation stones of Reconstruction scholarship, and specialists in this field had little accurate data about fundamental ideas and events such as the play of economic forces, radical thought, Black political accomplishments and patterns of Southern white cooperation with the Republican Party. Even more damaging to the comprehension of post-Reconstruction history was the erroneous assumption that Black participation in politics, bi-racial political coalitions, and, indeed, Reconstruction itself, virtually ended in 1877. Scholars, who overlooked patrician alliances with Blacks, independent movements, and the frequency of vigorous competitions for
Black votes, often assumed that “the solid South” of Democratic hegemony emerged as early as the eighteen seventies rather than after the collapse of Populism at the end of the century. The same historians generally failed to give proper credit to the large importance of the white primary system which emerged at the turn of the century or to discuss adequately the anti-Negro state constitutional conventions held between 1890 and 1910. Given the primitive condition of historical knowledge, it is not surprising that many scholars and educated laymen tended to assume that the monolithic one party system and the banal and mindless race-baiting politics of the Talmadges and the Bilbos had prevailed since Reconstruction.

When the illusion of uniqueness has been stripped from Watson and the Populists, key portions of Woodward’s interpretation quickly collapse. The Populists represented, to be sure, a kind of culmination to independent politics in the post-Reconstruction era, but the movement grew upon traditions which had existed among Republicans and independents for nearly two decades before the birth of Southern Populism. In Georgia, where William H. Felton served as an independent Congressman from 1875 to 1881 and Emory Speer nearly as long, rebellious independency came very close to dominating state politics. Among other Congressmen, Greenbackers W. M. Lowe of Alabama and Washington Jones of Texas played prominent parts in their state delegations during the late seventies. At the Virginia polls in 1879 William Mahone and his Re-adjustors actually captured control of the state. Greenback and Greenback-Labor tickets polled significant numbers of votes across the South in the elections of 1880 and 1884; the Republican Party made consequential gains during 1888 in several Southern states, the Alliance movement became a major political force between 1888 and 1891; and the Populists emerged in the early nineties as the most dynamic of all the challengers of the Democrats.11

Moreover, conservative Democrats continued to compete for Black votes in the eighties and nineties. The Mississippi entente created by Lucius Q. C. Lamar and Blanche K. Bruce in the seventies and sustained by others for more than a decade served to preserve some Black political gains as well as to keep a modest number of state and local offices in Black hands. This alliance of Blacks and white planters with its center of strength in the Delta country sent six Blacks to the state legislature as late as 1890. Similar political alliances elected Black candidates to legislative office in nearly every Southern state during the eighties and nineties and in McIntosh County, Georgia, as late as 1906. Although conservative whites resorted to violence and fraud, they nevertheless accepted Black suffrage as an established reality and often tried to win Black votes by promises and pledges as well as by force. Thus Watson and the Populists did nothing startlingly novel in making appeals and offering concessions to the Black electorate; they merely entered the competitive lists as the most recent contender in the old struggle by conservatives and independents for Black votes.

Woodward fostered illusions about Watson and the Populists in other ways by stressing the “singular” use of violence in the elections of 1892 and 1894, by insisting on the great risks Watson took in inviting Black cooperation, and by emphasizing Watson’s courage in sheltering
on his own farm a Black supporter, H. S. Doyle. First of all, it should be noted that Watson’s call for Black support merely continued a precedent set by Democrats, Republicans, and independents for more than twenty years. The political violence cited by Woodward was commonplace in Southern politics rather than extraordinary. Illustrations could be cited almost endlessly but a few randomly selected cases will make the point: the Louisiana election of 1878 took a toll of 30 to 40 lives; Bayou Teche, Louisiana alone six years later yielded the bodies of sixteen political victims; Wilmington, North Carolina whites in 1898 killed twenty Blacks and mobbed or drove from the cities thousands of persons; white Democrats in Phoenix, South Carolina, during the same year killed more than two dozen men; and as late as 1921 an Ocoee, Florida, mob murdered twelve persons because Blacks attempted to vote.12

A careful examination of the Doyle incident casts much light on Watson and the allegedly extraordinary dangers of black and white cooperation. Much of the information we have on this episode is available because Watson’s enemies publicized it in 1906 as proof of his allegedly inadequate devotion to white supremacy. In response to headline charges that he entertained Doyle as a “HOUSE GUEST” and “HAD DINNER WITH BLACK PREACHER,” Watson “corrected” the record with a statement which freely granted the need and propriety for the Southern white man to protect “his darky.” However, he went on to insist that he had greeted Doyle with the curt command to “go back in that nigger house” behind his plantation home. When the Black preacher protested, “Mr. Watson, I am an educated man, I went to college,” Watson supposedly replied in a stern manner, “I can’t help that, Doyle—I’ll protect you but get in that nigger house.” All the details of this account cannot be confirmed but the truth of its essence can be checked in Watson’s brief report of October 28, 1892, in the People’s Party Paper which indicated that Doyle had been taken under Watson’s protection and was told to “take up quarters in a Negro house on the lot.” State and local newspapers confirm this account and also make it clear that Watson did not defy the authorities of his community or run any really serious risk of violence in sheltering Doyle. Before befriending the Black preacher he sought and secured the full cooperation of the Democratic mayor, the Populist county sheriff and other local officials who reprimanded the more violent Democrats. Several almost unprecedented arrests of these would-be “lynchers” indicate the extent of community support for Watson’s actions.13

A careful scrutiny of Doyle and Anthony Wilson, his Black colleague on the Populist platform, reveals a new set of ambiguities in Watson’s “alliance” of Black and white. First of all, it seems strange that these two men should constitute the sum total of Watson’s campaign staff for an appeal to Black voters in a district with a large Black majority. Doyle and Wilson, who were compensated for their efforts, functioned more as employees than as allies and were accused by Black politicians of being bribed into Watson’s service. When Watson and his two assistants spoke to Black audiences they sometimes had to face a barrage of difficult questions: Didn’t Watson have an anti-Negro record as a state legislator? Why had he ignored an unquestioned popular mandate in refusing to grant a legislative seat to the very same An-
Anthony Wilson who now campaigned for him? Why had Watson voted against a bill for Negro branch colleges and against appropriation bills for Black schools?

Watson’s efforts to explain his record were almost pathetically inadequate. It seemed that Georgia could not afford Black branch colleges because the state was “already committed” to an expensive state house and appropriations for Black schools had to be kept to a minimum. Also taxes could not be raised above a level already intolerably burdensome to the exploited taxpayer. As a private person Watson knew that Anthony Wilson won his legislative seat with a large majority but as a lawyer he felt compelled to vote against seating Wilson because he had failed to prove his case by “strictly legal testimony.” Although Watson did call for lower taxes and higher prices for farm products “to help both races,” few Blacks and less than a majority of whites had crops to sell or owned land to pay taxes on. Watson was also extremely vague about how he would advance these goals as a Congressman in Washington. When Black questioners asked what he had done for Georgia Blacks, he answered with rather feeble retorts such as the oft-used claim to have been the first Georgia Congressman to send free seeds to Black constituents. Under fire, Doyle and Wilson were reduced to even feebleer arguments and could only reply that Watson “was not the same man” but rather a person transformed by a great political regeneration. In the final analysis, even many of the generally accepted explanations about Watson’s conduct prior to 1892 give more credence to Hyde than to Jekyll. If Watson’s allegedly pro-Black stance existed at all—and that seems highly improbable—it came as a result of a dramatic conversion, lasted only a few brief years between 1892 and 1896, and was soon followed by an even more dramatic lapse into ultra-racism.14

The difficulties which Woodward and those who followed his lead experienced in interpreting Watson also extended to Southern Populism in general. Indeed, Woodward himself briefly acknowledged as much in Origins of the New South by noting that “the barriers of racial discrimination mounted in direct ratio with the tide of political democracy” and by granting that this popular white hostility provided “one of the reasons” for the tendency of Blacks to ally themselves with “reactionary” whites rather than with Populists. Woodward also admitted that at least a few Populists despaired Blacks and that some Populists imitated Democratic force and fraud but he did not reconcile these newly created contradictions. Consequently, the reader was left with warring impressions of popular white supremacy and of Populists somehow exempt from the new political conditions. Woodward, unable to surrender the old image of the Populists, asserted without adequate explanation that the political future after 1896 belonged to white supremacists such as “the Heflins” rather than to “fallen Populists” or “patricians.” Little was said about the political composition of this new group, “the Heflins”, and no serious attempt was made to explain how the upsurge of democracy created both racist extremes and the tolerant Populists.15

When the difficult questions are brought to the Alliance movement from which Populism emerged, the old interpretive approach encounters even larger obstacles. The Alliance in Georgia as in other South-
ern states consistently and openly expressed hostility toward the idea of Black participation, and Negroes had no choice other than to join a separate Colored Alliance movement organized by white men and vastly unequal in wealth, influence, and prospects for political power. White Alliances felt free to ask the support of the Negro groups for their policies and candidates but seldom if ever asked the advice or offered to aid the goals of the Black groups. Often the two organizations found themselves in complete opposition to each other, and particularly on the last two grand proposals of the nineteenth century to aid the Black masses, the Blair Education Bill and the Lodge Federal Election Bill. Alliance men who sat in the Georgia legislature voted overwhelmingly in 1891 for the largest number of anti-Black bills ever passed during a single year in the history of the state. The most important single piece of legislation was an act on state primaries which left all the basic rules to the discretion of the political party and thus opened the way for the Democratic white primary. (Atlanta and several other cities took advantage of the new statute almost immediately.) Other laws established the first state-wide Jim Crow requirements for trains, reestablished the dreaded practice of working convicts under whipping bosses, and spitefully created a Black normal school in Athens simply to receive Federal funds taken away from Atlanta Negro colleges because their white professors sent sons and daughters to the Black schools. Among the unsuccessful bills were many proposals to carve out new areas of compulsory segregation and a dangerous plan to destroy virtually Black schools by limiting their budgets to the small sums collected in taxes from Black property holders.

The Alliance origins of most Populist leaders gave Black voters ample reason to distrust Populist overtures. Moreover, some Populist candidates with notorious anti-Negro records gave Black leaders such as W. H. Styles, a Republican candidate for the state senate, cause to complain that it would be absurd for Black voters to support men who “were in the front rank when that army of oppression came against the Negro.” Neither the presence of two lonely and isolated Blacks in the state convention of 1892 nor the total absence of Blacks from the list of Populist candidates did much to alleviate Negro suspicions. Populist insistence on segregation at political meetings also seemed to show a lack of good faith. Finally, the Populists rejected the idea of a state Fusion ticket with the Republicans despite the persistent requests of Black leaders and a widespread feeling that only Fusion and a bi-racial ticket offered any prospects for victory at the polls. Even President Harrison overcame his loathing for the Populists sufficiently to sanction a Fusion ticket in Georgia, an action he lived to regret bitterly because of Populist and Democratic fraud and force. The President reportedly asserted that “I have washed my hands of the south. It is a land of rebels and traitors who care nothing for the sanctity of the ballot, and I will never be in favor of making an active campaign down there until we can place bayonets at the polls.” Certainly, it had been a larger gamble for the ultra conservative chief executive to risk the danger of “obnoxious” reforms in Georgia to strengthen Presidential Republicanism than for the allegedly radical Populists to risk the unpleasantness of a few Black officeholders to increase enormously their prospects for establishing a state reform regime. The fact that most Georgia leaders
refused even to discuss Fusion seriously both confirmed their devotion to white supremacy and called into question their radicalism.16

Only in North Carolina through Fusion politics and bi-racial tickets, (demanded by Republicans rather than Populists) did the People's Party actually succeed in making social changes. From this coalition, whites regained the local government which had been taken from them by white conservatives and the Blacks made more gains than in any Southern state since Reconstruction. Blacks gained a significant number of state and local offices, and they and low income whites also won in communities such as Wilmington an almost unprecedented measure of police protection, public safety and justice from bi-racial police and courts. That North Carolina's success was Georgia's failure Woodward and other scholars failed to see. In Origins of the New South Woodward spoke of the "temptation" to make corrupt "deals" with Republican bosses" and of the ways in which Populists were sometimes driven to "surrender principle" to Fusion forces from "despair of coping with the Democratic use of the Negro." Quite the reverse was actually the case, for only through Fusion could leaders of the People's Party hope for the success that would make any kind of reform possible. Most of the Populists were simply more committed to white supremacy than to reform and many Black voters seemed well aware of this fact. Because the Populists in no Southern state offered Black voters enough to tempt the majority, the Blacks continued to try and secure modest gains through the Democratic and Republican parties.

When the Georgia Populist leadership in 1892 continued to insist on Black endorsement without Fusion or Black candidates, most of the Black Republicans on the state executive committee joined W. A. Pledger in rejecting the Populist appeals. Populist delegates who went to President E. S. Richardson and other officers of the Colored Alliance for official endorsement gained their unenthusiastic consent. A few Black leaders on their own initiative also quietly sought out W. L. Peek, the Populist gubernatorial candidate, but he offered a very cool reception and would promise little more than a reformation of the convict lease system. By contrast the Democratic incumbent William J. Northen, who had increased Black school appropriations and denounced lynching, promised an anti-lynching bill and more school money for Black children. In the election that followed, Black voters consulted their own self-interest, chose the lesser of the two evils and cast most of their votes for Northen and other Democratic candidates.

Nevertheless, Populist candidates won enough Black votes to encourage them in more strenuous efforts to gain voters in 1894 by admitting twenty-four Black delegates to the state convention and one of that number to the party executive committee. Unfortunately for the cause of Populism, the Black delegation still represented token seating for a small and isolated minority whose requests for Black candidates and issues were largely ignored by the convention. The new Populist candidate for governor did not treat Black leaders quite so coolly, but he and many other office seekers continued to compete with the Democrats in attacking Blacks before white audiences. The token efforts of the Populists in 1894 and the promises of a few of their prominent leaders to come out for Fusion and Black representation on the ticket in
1896 did succeed in bringing a larger number of Georgia Blacks to the People's Party in 1894 than in any other election.17

Populist tactics were inadequate to the task of drawing mass Black support for several reasons, beginning with the fact that Black leaders frequently doubted the sincerity of white Populists. In 1894 while accusing the Democrats of racial duplicity and fraudulent appeals to Blacks, the Populists called on Black voters to oppose the Democrats because the governor had pardoned a white man sentenced for killing a Black person and appealed to whites to reject the Democrats because the same governor had freed a Black man convicted of murdering a white person. While the Populists imitated the Democrats in opening rallies and barbecues to Blacks and in using Black speakers, they failed to convert large numbers of Blacks through these tactics. A few white leaders made honest attempts to divide Populist Party offices on the county level, but these efforts generally failed. When Populist officers in predominantly Black Greene County agreed to divide equally the places on the county committee, the enraged white rank and file walked out of the mass meeting called to ratify the agreement. Many Populist speakers attacked Blacks before white audiences with all the venom of militant white supremacy Democrats and in Washington and other communities whites left Populist rallies to attack Blacks for attending Democratic meetings. In 1896 one large Populist delegation from all over the northern and central portions of the state asked William H. Felton, a former Independent congressman, to run for congress as a Populist and to join them in a crusade against Cleveland because the "nigger-lovers" had taken over the national party. As evidence for their contention, the delegation pointed to the stories about Cleveland's appointment of Blacks to office and entertainment of Frederick Douglass and his white wife at the White House. Less hostile Populists might have offset some of the angry speech and action with symbolic gestures such as attending Negro conventions and meetings, but the only publicized instance of this kind was provided by the attendance of Joseph C. Manning of Alabama at several sessions of the National Afro-American Council.18

When Georgia Populist leaders in 1896 betrayed the promises made two years earlier by arrogantly rejecting all Fusion schemes and by reducing the small number of Blacks in Populist councils, Black support for the party fell off sharply. By 1898 the Populist Black minority had become completely disillusioned with Fusion as well as with Populism and the radically decimated People's Party substituted for the old appeals to Black voters bitter denunciations of the whole idea of Negro suffrage. Ironically the ultra white supremacists who spoke for both the Populists and the Democrats from 1898 on cited the "monstrous" example of Populist and Black gains made in North Carolina through bi-racial and bipartisan Fusion to demonstrate the terrible social problems which sprang from this kind of evil racial and political cooperation.

It is clear that Populist leaders wished to harvest Black votes without compromising any major doctrines or practices of white supremacy. But what of Tom Watson? Was he a unique exception to the general rule or a confirmation of it? Although Woodward did quote Watson accurately and Watson did make conciliatory remarks in 1892 and
1894, the collation of all the surviving speeches and newspaper accounts of public meetings suggests a pattern of duplicity in which Watson made three kinds of speeches, one for whites, one for Blacks, and one which featured the perilous attempt to accommodate simultaneously both white supremacy and Black aspirations. It is instructive to examine a speech of 1892 to a largely Black audience of Sparta in which he assured the audience of his sympathy for Black aspirations toward “political equality” and of his acceptance of the fact that “the color line has been broken.” In the next few days Watson was to be denounced all over the state so vehemently that he felt compelled to issue an apologetic statement, but the first strong response to his suggestions came from the Black audience who lingered behind after his departure to debate the meaning of the two sensational phrases. Several dozen Black men and women, hardly knowing whether to believe the evidence of their senses, decided to resolve their doubts by seeking out the candidate at The Drummer’s House where he had a room. When Watson’s hostess came to the front door and found a Black crowd expected to be invited into the hotel lounge to discuss with the candidate the precise meaning of his speech, she flew into a rage over so gross a violation of caste etiquette and ordered the Blacks away in very insulting terms. The delegation, bewildered by the contrast between Watson’s warm appeal and his hostess’s angry conduct, began to remonstrate with her and called for Watson to come out. The candidate did not leave the hotel until the local sheriff arrived on the scene to disperse the “mob” and arrest its leaders, and then he appeared only to apologize to whites in the community who might have misunderstood his speech as an invitation to loathsome “social equality” rather than as a purely political invitation for the Blacks to support the Populist ticket.

Watson’s campaign contained many appeals for Black votes and many assurances of his basic commitment to white supremacy. Frequently he had to answer from the stump white complaints that the People’s Party was in the throes of becoming a “nigger party” and that bi-racial political cooperation would lead to “negro supremacy, mongrelism and the destruction of Anglo-Saxon wives, daughters, and womanhood.” Whenever Watson heard these complaints from predominantly white audiences, he assured them that Populism opposed “social equality and miscegenation,” that the Blacks themselves rejected social equality, and that in any event Blacks could not gain this equality without the white consent which would never be given. Not content to rest here, Watson went on to tell his listeners that whites and Blacks had the same community of interests as during the Civil War when white men fought to save Southern society and Black people ignored opportunities for vengeance to protect white families. The same Confederate captains and their sons, it seems, struggled once again alongside the loyal old Black retainers and their offspring to rescue the South through the triumph of the Populist Party. Moreover, white Populists had to realize that if they did not talk candidly and openly to Blacks, “Carpetbaggers, Scalawags and demagogues” would hold sinister negotiations behind closed doors.

When Georgia Democrats accused Watson of endangering white supremacy by “splitting the vote” he replied by insisting that the only
serious menace to “Southern customs” came from national politicians of “the old party” such as Grover Cleveland. Presumably Cleveland had demonstrated his attachment to “race mixing” as governor of New York by signing a “social equality law” in 1884 which prohibited the assignment of children to any school solely on the basis of race. When Cleveland overrode Governor Altgeld’s protests to break an Illinois strike with Federal troops Watson objected as a reformer, but he also bitterly complained that the President had “violated states rights” and opened the door to a dangerous “centralism” which might be used at any time to “disrupt” Southern society. If Watson himself felt compelled to call for national legislature he was careful to demand the protection of “Southern rights” and to clothe his proposal in a neo-Jeffersonian states rights and anti-national rhetoric. Well aware of the fact that he had been charged with “fostering social equality on trains” for discussing Federal regulation of railroads, he generally salted his speeches with protestations of loyalty to Jim Crow transportation and opposition to new patterns of “race mixing.”

The only obstacle to the “solution” of the “race problem”, according to Watson, was the spectre of “Federal interference”; and since the national government had long ceased to “intervene” in school and transportation problems, elections provided the only area of possible danger. He agreed with his critics about the evil nature of the Lodge Federal Elections Bill (“Force Act”) but he assured his followers that the bill failed twice and had no prospects of passage. With the Federal government out of the picture and with Negroes devoted to the pursuit of economic gain rather than “social equality,” white Georgians could afford to ignore Democratic demands for white unity and forge the new party which would take in all those whites who would not vote Republican as well as those Blacks who could not bring themselves to vote the Democratic ticket. The triumph of the People’s Party would in the end bring about economic and social changes of great benefit to the lives of Blacks as well as of whites. Thus, three years before Booker T. Washington’s celebrated “Atlanta compromise” speech; Watson firmly enunciated the principles of partial and largely passive Black participation in politics, general acceptance of the racial status quo, and Black concentration on economic gains. Limited as these goals may sound today, Watson and most white leaders began to denounce them as intolerable at the turn of the century.

The failure of Watson and his fellow Populists to grasp rare historic opportunities and to exploit them effectively represented a major failure of the political and the human imagination. Despite Watson’s planter origins and continuing exploitation of Black labor on a large scale, he did catch a glimmer of insight into the plight of Black people and the meaning of poverty for both races, but he lacked the inner courage and the authentic political radicalism to surrender to this insight any substantial portion of white supremacy ideology. The history of reform in the South during the Populist-Progressive era suggests very forcefully that the gap between white reformers and conservatives was small in comparison to that great chasm of race. In fact, white reform often meant Black repression. Populists and Progressives frequently went so far as to equip their demands for more repression and Jim...
Crow laws with reform credentials calling for "better race relations" or "the prevention of friction between the races." Many Black voters, who apparently grasped the fact that they had little or nothing to gain from the reformers, voted conservative as the lesser of two evils. It would be absurd to paint the conservatives in glowing colors since they believed as passionately in white supremacy, but it is important to note that they were also inclined to accept the status quo and to doubt any urgent need for new repressive measures.22

Although Watson's life-long devotion to white supremacy, the South and "states rights" provided a thread of continuity for his entire political career, it is foolish to suppose that all paradoxical elements in his life and thought can be easily resolved in a brief article. The man who always insisted on the fundamentals of white racial superiority did during the eighteen nineties make a few token concessions to Blacks; also honored Eugene Debs and insisted on the right of Milwaukee to send Victor Berger to Congress in 1919 as a socialist; and the stump politician who defended private property as "just" and "sacred" did not hesitate to defend the Bolsheviks in 1919 or to demand the withdrawal of American troops from Russia the following year. Some of these surprising positions can be explained in terms of an extremely secure and loyal constituency willing to tolerate the eccentric leftist dabbling of a man whom they knew to be well grounded in their racist ideology and regional loyalty. Moreover many of Watson's deviations can be traced to his pathological hatred of all things Wilsonian. Even so, one is left with the reactionary who took a certain pleasure in playing with radical rhetoric from time to time, and with the living monument to xenophobia who turned the Klan loose on the American Legion and its one hundred per cent Americanism. Watson's ability to court heresy without risking the isolation and hostility generally visited upon the village atheist sprang from the fact that he was so perfectly atuned to the prevailing climate of opinion on the vital questions of race, Southern history, and "states rights." Watson also functioned as the peddler of political goods about which his customers were often ignorant; he knew that if he wrapped the product in a bit of Dixie cellophane his followers would listen to "good old Tom." If anyone wishes to insist that an element of mystery remains when all of these factors have been taken into account, it still seems reasonably safe to say that only an extremely precise and thorough modern biographer could hope to provide the proper answers. Meanwhile, it is necessary to recognize the fact that Watson and his movement had little to do with radicalism or with the fate and aspirations of Black people.23

University of Georgia
Charles Crowe

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1 For these anti-Catholic remarks and similar ones by Watson, see Watson's Jeffersonian Weekly, Dec. 16, 1909, June 22, 1911, Jan. 25, 1912, April 16, 1914, Oct. 21, 1915, Dec. 23, 1915; and Watson's Jeffersonian Magazine XIV (1912), 996,1000 and XVIII (1914), 225.

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Jan. 11, 1917. See also Watson’s Magazine XXI (1915), 156, 22; Atlanta Constitution, Sept. 17-20, 1915; and New York Times, Aug. 20-24, 1915. Harry Golden’s A Child is Dead (1965) is a hastily prepared and superficial account of the Frank case. For a more accurate and revealing account, see Leonard Dinerstein, The Leo Frank Case (1968).

3 For Watson’s comments on socialism, see Watson to John N. Taylor, April 23, 1910, Watson Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Watson’s Jeffersonian Magazine III (1909), 914, and IV (1910), 4, 93, 267-277, 360, 451-452, 537-540. De Leon’s comments can be found in his Watson on the Gridiron (1926), 20-43. For a few choice Watsonian remarks on European “mongrels” and the immigrant “menace” see Watson’s Jeffersonian Magazine III (1906), 821-839.


5 Woodward relies a good bit on the one article which Watson wrote for a national periodical during the nineties. (See Watson’s “The Negro Question in the South,” Arena VI (1892), 540-55.) For coverage of similar local speeches, see the People’s Party Paper Nov. 3, 1893, and May 24, 1894.

6 See Woodward’s three page preface to Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel.

7 Tom Watson, Ms. Journal, II (1883), 296, 317-331, 407, 409. Watson Papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


10 See any one of the first four editions, S. E. Morison and H. S. Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, Vol. I.

11 No adequate account of Southern independent movements has been written but scattered references can be found in C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South (1951) and Vincent P. DeSantis, The Republicans Face the Southern Question, The New Departure Years, 1877-1897 (1959). Most of the state studies which involve discussions of independent movements are not really helpful. (See for example A. M. Arnett, The Populist Movement in Georgia (1922).)


14 On Watson’s 1906 version of the incident, see the Atlanta Journal Aug. 4, 1906. Several references by Watson to “the boy” (Doyle) are worth noting in the Macon Telegraph, Oct. 26, 1892. The mayor of Thomson actually offered police protection to Watson and Doyle, but Watson refused the offer. It is possible that the incident was contrived by Watson as the Augusta Chronicle insisted on Oct. 24, 1892 and the Macon Telegraph on Oct. 26, 1892. See also The Contested Election of Thomas E. Watson vs. J. C. Black (1896) 669-796.

15 For two accounts of a Doyle speech in Thomson, see the Augusta Chronicle, Oct. 26, 1892 and the Atlanta Constitution, Oct. 26, 1892. On the hostile charges against Watson and his black aides, see the Atlanta Constitution Aug. 24, Aug. 26, 1892; and the Atlanta Journal, Sept. 2, Sept. 24, 1892.

16 See Ch XII, “The Mississippi Plan as the American Way of Life” in Woodward, Origins of the New South (1951), 321-349. For a characteristic Watsonian appeal for black votes, see the Atlanta Journal, Aug. 10, 1892.

17 On Jim Crow legislation, see the Atlanta Constitution July 21-24, 1891; Savannah Tribune Nov. 28, 1891; Georgia Laws 1890-91, I, 211-213; Acts of the

17 For some interesting comments on black support of Northen and the Democrats, see the Bulletin of Atlanta University, Nov. 1892, p. 4. For Bishop Turner’s opposition to the Populists, see the Atlanta Journal, Sept. 30, 1892, and for Pledger’s position, see the Atlanta Journal, Sept. 19, 1892. For comments on the support given to Northen by the Georgia Negro Press Association, see the Savannah Tribune, July 1, 1893. On the Colored Alliance and the Populists, see the Atlanta Journal, Sept. 27, 1892. On Democratic attempts to woo black voters, see the Atlanta Constitution, July 1, 1892; the Atlanta Journal Aug. 15, 18, 25, Sept. 2, 1892; and Georgia Writer’s Program, The Story of Washington-Wilkes County (1943), 72-72. Richardson seems to have led the state Alliance better than many other Colored Alliance leaders. The organization had been formed by a white Baptist missionary, R. M. Humphrey, who at times seemed willing to serve his constituents and other times willing to betray them at the drop of a hat. (See the National Economist I (1889) 6-7 and the Richmond Dispatch, Aug. 19, 1891.) At most national Alliance and Populist meetings Southern white hostility was all too evident. At the crucial Populist convention at St. Louis in Feb., 1892, Humphrey corruptly sold all the Colored Alliance credentials to a white Georgian named J. L. Gilmore. Richardson led his Georgia delegation in their protest refusal to participate in the convention. When Gilmore cast all 97 votes allocated to the Colored Alliance for the third party against the will of nearly all the black delegates and the third party caucus then expelled the blacks, virtually the whole black delegation walked out. (See the Atlanta Constitution, May 2, May 21, 1891; Feb. 23, 26, 1892.)

18 It is interesting to note the bitter denunciation by white Populists of a Colored Alliance proposal to call a strike of black cotton pickers. (See the Atlanta Constitution, Sept. 15, 1891; and the National Economist, Sept. 26, Oct. 10, 1891. On white Populist violence against blacks at Washington, Georgia see the Atlanta Constitution, Aug. 25, 1892, and for other similar incidents, see the Augusta Chronicle, Oct. 6, 1892; and the Farmer’s Light, Oct. 20, 1892. On Felton and the Populist delegation, see Rebecca Felton, Memoirs of Georgia Politics (1911), 659.

19 On Watson’s remarks about “wiping out the color line,” see the Atlanta Constitution, Aug. 25, 1892; and for other similar incidents, see the A. S. Van de Graff, “Unaided Solution of the Southern Racial Problem,” Forum XXI (1896), 332-335.

20 For these and other remarks by Watson see, the People’s Party Paper, Sept. 16, 1892; May 25, July 13, Aug. 24, 1893: and the Atlanta Journal, May 17, 1894.

21 For Watson’s efforts to answer charges that he was an enemy of white supremacy (made in the Atlanta Journal, April 7, 1892), see the People’s Party Paper, April 28, Sept. 16, 1892. On Watson’s efforts to help Speaker Reed stop the mass distribution of copies of the Lodge Bill, see the Atlanta Constitution, Aug. 27, 1892.
