FOUR OKLAHOMA POPULISTS: CONTEMPORARY "POPULISM STUDIES" IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In June 2023—located on the Rue de la Loi and within walking distance of the European Commission and Parliament—a new think tank appeared in Brussels. Called the European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), it now serves as a clearing house for its burgeoning discipline. Perhaps such an organization was needed, for there has been a tremendous upsurge in academic studies of populism in recent years. Thousands of peer-reviewed articles on the subject have appeared since 2003, most in the last ten years. The professional literature is filling up with studies on the influence of populism in many places: Hungary, Kenya, El Salvador, and pretty much everywhere else. Even before creation of the ECPS, the academic subject was increasingly institutionalized, with several leading universities launching populism research initiatives.

In an avalanche of books and articles, with only a handful of dissenters, contemporary scholars of populism treat their subject as a problem: as a worldwide, antidemocratic phenomenon which must be understood in order to be defeated. According to the ECPS, for example, "populism" causes "democratic decay and authoritarianism around the world and endangers global peace, security, and stability." Leading scholarly voices on populism affirm this assessment. The center of the new academic specialty has been in Western Europe. Much of it concentrates on (and has been stimulated by) current events such as Brexit and the election

of Donald Trump.[1]

This upsurge has been surprising. Until the 1990s, debates on populism had been quietly confined to the academy. They took place primarily in the United States. Such scholarship dealt chiefly with the nineteenth century—especially the American People's Party—and focused on historiography. Populism itself seemed an historical artifact. By 1991, for example, nearly a century of academic disputation on populism appeared to be drawing to a close. This debate had mostly focused on "big P" Populism, that is, on the People's Party and its immediate predecessors. For the most part, a favorable portrait of populism had prevailed. Numerous scholars, including historians Lawrence Goodwyn and Norman Pollack, had rather effectively refuted the negative, "revisionist" views which fellow historian Richard Hofstadter propounded in the 1950s. Several scholars waxed rhapsodic about the Populists, praising their tolerance and "commitment to political democracy" as "a glorious chapter in the eternal struggle for human rights."[2]

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1 Who We Are," European Center for Populism Studies, September 21, 2023, https://www.populismstudies.org/about-us/; Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 103; Lawrence Rosenthal, *Empire of Resentment: Populism's Toxic Embrace of Nationalism* (New York: The New Press, 2020); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

2 Anton Jäger, "Populism and the Historians: Richard Hofstadter and the Birth of a Global Populism Debate," *History of Political Thought* XLIV, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 153-94; Cristóbal Kaltwasser et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3-13; Raymond J. Cunningham, ed., *The Populists in Historical Perspective* (Boston: DC Heath, 1968); Theodore Saloutos, *Populism: Reaction or Reform?* (New York: Holt, 1968); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 288; Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 553-54; Norman Pollack, *The Populist*

Thus, a disconnect has developed between perspectives on populism endorsed by European political scientists in the present (overwhelmingly negative) and the views recently upheld by American historians (mostly positive). A review of populist historical experience can help connect the two sides of this academic divide and help elucidate the nature of populism. Indeed, scholars have long struggled—and continue to struggle—to define populism. Some scholars today even claim that nineteenth-century American Populists, the people who invented the word, were "not in fact populists."[3] On the other hand, many persons widely regarded as populists do not accept the designation

It has therefore been necessary to adopt a working definition of populism (that is, "small p" populism) which does not presuppose positive or negative views. Rather than merely accepting historical or *au courant* scholarly understandings, this essay adopts definitions from standard English language usage. The *American Heritage Dictionar*y defines populism as "a political philosophy supporting the rights and power of the people in their struggle against the privileged elite." One advantage of this definition is that both schools of populist interpretation accept anti-elitism and championship of the common people as "necessary," if not sufficient, conditions for populist identification.[4]

Using this working definition, then, the following essay briefly looks at the populist experience in twentieth-century Oklahoma. Such investigation necessarily deals with "small p" populism. The

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Response to Industrial America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 143.

3 Müller, 85; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-6.

4 "Populism," *American Heritage Dictionary*, September 22, 2023, https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=populism; Barton C. Shaw, *The Wool Hat Boys: Georgia's Populist Party* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1984), 1-2; Müller, 3, 102-103; Roger Eatwell, "Populism and Fascism," in *Oxford Handbook*, 364.

People's Party had disintegrated by 1900, well before Oklahoma statehood. Oklahoma provides a prime vehicle for such an examination. Indeed, one might easily regard the Sooner State, past and present, as populist ground zero. Powerful populist personalities have made a cultural mark on the state. "Make crime pay. Become a lawyer," cowboy/entertainer Will Rogers once quipped. Decades later, country musicians Merle Haggard in "Okie from Muskogee" (1969) and Garth Brooks in "Friends in Low Places" (1990), would famously roast elitism to glorify the common person.

The state also has a long history of populist-style politics. By analyzing the ideas and actions of four Oklahoma exemplars of political populism, one may gain insight regarding the current boom in populism studies. These four notables are Thomas P. Gore (1870-1949), William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray (1869-1956), Willmoore Kendall (1909-1967), and Fred R. Harris (1930-Present). Gore and Harris called themselves populists. Murray and Kendall did not, but the latter men also met the "small p" populist criteria defined above. In looking at these individuals, analysis focuses on two attributes which contemporary scholars generally ascribe to populists.[5] The essay asks, that is, whether populism has been especially prone to anti-pluralism and authoritarianism.

Pluralism can refer to acceptance of equal rights (voting, free speech, etc.) for diverse social groups (based on race, religion, or other characteristics). Taken further, however, pluralism involves the "open society." Grounded in the ideas of philosophers Henri Bergson and Karl Popper, the open society sees collective restraints on individual behavior as oppressive. Morals are best created by each person, and society should accept these individualized ethical codes. According to the ECPS, pluralism means not only full rights for diverse groups but also demands an open society.[6] Applying this last rubric to historical figures, however, is problematic.

5 Müller, 3-4; Norris, 9-12.

6 "Who We Are," ECPS.

Several values for which the ECPS demands protection (e.g., transgenderism) would have been virtually incomprehensible to persons of yesteryear. Defining pluralism as respect for the rights of diverse groups is more analytically fruitful.

The charge of authoritarianism lies at the heart of contemporary critiques of populism. Populists, in this view, gravitate toward power-hungry demagogues. Various charismatic leaders build cults of personality by appealing to the fears and prejudices of citizens. In power they supposedly feel free to ignore the rule of law and to overawe opponents. Current day "populist" leaders in Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, the United States are said to exemplify this authoritarian tendency. Such leaders evoke fear among populism studies scholars because they are thought to endanger both "liberal democracy" and "social democracy."[7]

Of the four Oklahomans under the magnifying glass, only Thomas Gore was ever a "big P" Populist, that is, an actual member of the People's Party. After its collapse he transferred to the Democratic Party, serving as US Senator from 1907 until 1921, then again from 1931 to 1937. An able orator, Gore articulated common populist themes of identification with ordinary voters and distrust of elites. "I would rather be a humble private in the ranks of those who struggle for justice and equality," he once said, "than to be a minion of plutocracy, though adorned with purple and gold."[8]

As a stalwart anti-militarist, Gore defended pluralism, in this case, the right of Americans to express unpopular opinions. In

7 Kurt Weyland, "Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach," in *Oxford Handbook* 54-55; Henrik Bang and David Marsh, "*Populism*: A Major Threat to Democracy?", *Policy Studies* 39, no. 3 (2018): 353; Stephen Rummens, "Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy," in *Oxford Handbook*, 554-70.

8 "Gore, Thomas Pryor (1870-1949)," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, September 15, 2023, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=GO013.

1916 he broke with President Woodrow Wilson by pushing for a ban on American travel on ships of World War I belligerents. The next year he opposed the Declaration of War against Germany. Once the war started, he opposed conscription. As fierce wartime intolerance gripped Oklahoma, he braved the public's wrath by voting against the Sedition Act of 1918. As German Mennonites suffered persecution in Oklahoma for their pacifism, Gore received ferocious criticism for friendly advice to a conscientious objector. On the other hand, Gore's pluralism did not extend to questions of race. As a segregationist he *ipso facto* rejected social and political equality for African Americans.[9]

As regards authoritarianism, Thomas Gore was more victim than perpetrator. Amid crises of war and depression, he strongly challenged the domineering executive actions of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. His was a lonely voice in the Senate in opposing various New Deal relief programs. Attacked rather viciously by members of his own party, Gore lost access to patronage and the confidence of voters. By taking stands on principle, he twice forfeited his Senate seat, first in 1920 and again in 1936. But, said he, "the people giveth and the people taketh away."[10]

At first glance, and maybe at second glance too, William H. Murray fits the contemporary scholarly trope of crazed, power-hungry populist. He cultivated a following among Oklahoma's plain folk, bitterly denounced corporations, and appealed to "the boys at the fork of the creek." In his own words, Murray was the cabin builder of the Oklahoma Constitution. Presiding at the state constitutional

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9 Monroe Lee Billington, *Thomas P. Gore: The Blind Senator From Oklahoma* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1957), *passim*; Marvin E. Kroeker, "'In Death You Shall Not Wear it Either:' The Persecution of Mennonite Pacifists in Oklahoma," in *"An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before:' Alternative Views of Oklahoma History*, ed. Davis D. Joyce (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 80-100.

10 Billington, 178 and *passim.*

convention, he had a huge impact on its deliberations. Observers viewed the resulting document, with either admiration or horror, as a masterpiece of populist-style progressivism. Murray, a Democrat, later served as Speaker of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, US Congressman, and Governor.[11]

In general, the charge of anti-pluralism applies to Murray. Although his cabin—the state constitution—guaranteed "perfect toleration of religious sentiment," it also included an anti-Mormon provision against "polygamous or plural marriages." The constitution did not restrict black voting rights or mandate Jim Crow, but the absence of such provisions reflected Murray's tactical concerns for getting federal approval. For most of his career Murray avidly supported racial segregation. In the 1940s and 1950s, after political retirement, he loudly proclaimed racist and antisemitic views in a series of books.[12]

The charge of authoritarianism also seems appropriate for describing Murray's time as governor (1931-35). In that post he called out the National Guard dozens of times. He used guardsmen to restrict oil production, to seize a bridge over the Red River in a border dispute with Texas, to prevent a lynching, to root out suspected communists in Henryetta, and to oversee ticket sales

11 William H. Murray, "Making a Constitution," November 20, 1906 and "Constructing the Cabin of State," April 19, 1910, in *The Speeches of William Henry Murray* (Oklahoma City, Harlow, 1931), 1-14; Stephen Jones, *Oklahoma Politics in State and Nation, Vol. 1: 1907-1962* (Enid: Haymaker Press, 1974), 42-43; "Murray, William Henry David (1869-1957)," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, September 14, 2023, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=MU014; W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 173-74; Arrell Morgan Gibson, *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries*, 2d ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 198-200; Keith L. Bryant, Jr., *Alfalfa Bill Murray* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), *passim*.

12 Jones, 45; Bryant, *passim*.

at the Oklahoma-Nebraska football game. He constantly feuded with members of his own cabinet, intimidated state employees, packed state government with cronies, and bulldozed bills through a reluctant legislature. Appearing frequently in the newspapers, he achieved national notoriety as the "Sage of Tishomingo." In 1932 Murray launched a campaign for president but lost badly to Franklin Roosevelt.[13]

Unlike the other persons examined, Willmoore Kendall was not a politician. Over the years he worked as an intelligence officer, journalist, and Ivy League political theorist. Kendall was a founding editor of *National Review* and an important voice in the conservative political renaissance of the 1950s. Kendall's views on pluralism were complex and carefully reasoned. He attacked the open society as impractical and undesirable. For a society to survive, he held, a certain degree of "orthodoxy" was necessary. No society could cohere in the real world if tolerating any and all opinions. Any society which granted absolute protection to the words of its enemies would certainly fall. Moreover, said he, any would-be open society must necessarily force opponents of the open society to accept an openness they do not desire. Thus, no such society could actually exist. As Kendall explained it, his views did not mean anti-pluralism. Rather, he argued for a "free society." Such society would provide broad (but not unlimited) space for expression of many viewpoints by lots of groups. He believed such a society could be maintained for the long haul (as it had been in the United States) and that it would be freer than a society of coerced openness.[14]

Critics often accused Kendall of being an authoritarian, even of being a Fascist. Ultimately, these charges miss the mark. Kendall

13 Bryant, chs. ix-xi.

14 Christopher H. Owen, *Heaven Can Indeed Fall: The Life of Willmoore Kendall* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), *passim*; Willmoore Kendall, "Conservatism and the 'Open Society,'" in *The Conservative Affirmation* (Chicago: Regnery, 1985), 100-120.

always remained a "majority-rule democrat." He believed that the will of the people, as determined by majority vote, should prevail in politics. Initially an "absolute majoritarian" smitten by Rousseau, he became a Madisonian. The American constitutional system, he said, allowed majority will to prevail over time. Deliberation in Congress, through a give-and-take process among members representing diverse regions and interest groups, could reach decisions reflecting the people's will. Kendall was deeply hostile to an over-powerful executive branch. Presidents, he said, treated the American people as an undifferentiated whole, but Congress worked through the people in all its plurality. He did not therefore crave a transformational strong man. Rather, he wanted a rejuvenated federal legislature which could check executive authority and thereby protect political pluralism.[15]

From 1964 to 1973, after a spell in the state legislature, Fred R. Harris served as US Senator from Oklahoma. He came within an eyelash of receiving the Democratic nomination for Vice-President in 1968. He also served as Chair of the Democratic National Committee in 1969-70, then exited politics. His anti-elitism focused on inordinate corporate political influence especially that of the oil industry. Through his "new populism," he hoped to help common people achieve "widespread diffusion of economic and political power." Harris thought that big government and big business, by limiting popular participation in decision-making, often made individuals feel powerless and depressed.[16]

Harris avidly embraced pluralism. His new populism tried to draw on the best aspects of his state's populist tradition while purging it of racist, anti-pluralist features. He came up with the idea for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner

15 Owen, *passim*; Willmoore Kendall, "The Two Majorities in American Politics," in *The Conservative Affirmation*, 1-20.

16 Fred R. Harris, *Potomac Fever* (New York: Norton, 1977), *passim*; Fred R. Harris, *The New Populism* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), 10-11.

Commission) which President Johnson established in 1967. One of the committee's most active members, Harris endorsed its controversial conclusion that systemic racism caused race riots. As Democratic chair, he put more women and minorities into leadership positions and reduced the power of party bosses. Recognizing the dangers of "Potomac fever," Harris was not an authoritarian. An effective wheeler-dealer at the highest political levels, he was ambitious for higher office (running twice for president). His strong liberal opinions came to rub many Oklahomans the wrong way. But Harris was no strong man promising political mayhem. He retired quietly into private life and became a teacher.[17]

Totting this all up, one may draw some tentative conclusions about historical "small p" populism. At first there may appear to be a connection between populism and anti-pluralism. One might see populist anti-pluralism at work, for example, in the anti-polygamy provisions of the state constitution, in segregation, and in the racially restrictive voting laws adopted after statehood. Yet nothing linked populism as such to these developments. A Republican president and Congress had demanded the anti-polygamy provision, which was not, therefore, populistic in origin. Because anti-black racism was pervasive in early twentieth-century Oklahoma, there was nothing particularly *populistic* about Murray and Gore supporting racially discriminatory laws. In the first days of statehood, for example, Murray was berated by anti-populist forces for not aggressively implementing segregation and black disfranchisement. The Klan attacked Gore for being insufficiently committed to white supremacy. Racially discriminatory anti-pluralism, that is, appears to have been historically compatible with "small p" populism but not to have been produced by or specially linked to it.[18] To be sure, Murray's racist diatribes from the 1940s

17 Harris, *Fever*, 106-13; 132-33, 173-75; Harris, *Populism*, 206-207.

18 "Enabling Act, 1906," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, September 23, 2023, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=EN001; Baird and Goble, 172, 179; Gibson, 205; Billington, 138-39.

and 1950s were out of step (aka more racist) than the views of most Oklahomans at the time. For that very reason, however, they were not politically significant.

Certainly, none of the three deceased men under study supported the open society. In this sense, all were anti-pluralists. Kendall, however, cleverly turned this argument on its head by maintaining that the open society was itself inherently anti-pluralist. During his political career, Harris was about as pluralist as it was possible to be for a politician of his time. His work on the Kerner Commission, for example, focused on the dangers of white racism. But the vast majority of politicians of the day, including President Lyndon Johnson, rejected the commission's conclusions. Faced with the claim that "populists are *always* anti-pluralist," as made by political scientist Jan-Werner Müller, one must conclude that either: 1) Harris's claims to be a populist were false, or 2) Müller is wrong about the nature of populism.[19] At times, one finds anti-pluralism historically associated with populism. However, such anti-pluralism does not appear to be a necessary feature of populism, nor does populism, as examined here, appear to be more anti-pluralist than society at large, and sometimes less so.

Regarding authoritarianism, three of the men examined are outright no's. To validate Müller's further claim that populists are "always protoauthoritarians,"for example, one must conclude either that: 1) Gore, a self-proclaimed populist, was not really a populist, or that 2) his resistance to presidential authoritarianism was itself somehow authoritarian.[20] Neither Gore, Kendall, nor Harris exalted executive authority. None of them nourished a cult of personality.

As governor, however, Murray did both of these things. Yet, ironically, the chief obstacle to his authoritarian agenda was the state constitution which he himself had largely fashioned.

19 Müller, 3.

20 Ibid., 75.

He feuded with his cabinet because he could not fire its elected members. In referendums, which the populist-style constitution authorized, state voters rejected several measures, such a ban on corporate ownership of land, which Murray favored. The same document limited governors to one term, curtailing the executive's ability to build a political machine. Murray, the anti-authoritarian constitution builder, successfully stymied Murray, the would-be authoritarian governor. Thus, one may not unambiguously label even Alfalfa Bill as an authoritarian. For purpose of analysis here, then, authoritarianism does not appear strongly linked to populism.[21] In fact, looking at all four men, one can make a better case for populist anti-authoritarianism.

Based on these four Oklahomans, twentieth century "small p" populism is not, as such, logically or empirically linked to anti-pluralism or authoritarianism. Maybe, like the "big P Populism" which preceded it, the populism of Gore, Murray, Kendall, and Harris was not *really* populism, at least as contemporary scholars define the term. This essay's conclusion does not mean that anti-pluralism and authoritarianism are lacking in twenty-first-century populism. Nor does it show that populists, as such, to be paragons of pluralism. But this quick look into Oklahoma's past does suggest that today's scholars of populism should be more mindful of history and perhaps more nuanced in their claims.

21 Bryant, 190-255; Gibson, 198-99, 221-23.