

## BOOK ROUNDTABLE: *SEEDS OF DEMOCRACY*, BY MICHAEL J. LANSING

In his 2015 book *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics*, Michael J. Lansing examines the Nonpartisan League (NPL), an organization founded by a former socialist in North Dakota in 1915 that became one of the largest but least remembered and least studied challenges to major parties in U.S. and Canadian history. Lansing asks scholarly questions about past politics with the present in mind. As the book's jacket copy reads, "rather than a spasm of populist rage that inevitably burned itself out, the League is in fact an instructive example of how popular movements can create lasting change. Depicting the League as a transnational response to economic inequity, Lansing not only resurrects its story of citizen activism, but also allows us to see its potential to inform contemporary movements."<sup>1</sup>

Because this historical sensibility of using the past to understand and even inform current politics so nicely overlaps with the sensibility of this journal—and arguably of the study of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era from its very inception—we decided to make *Insurgent Democracy* the subject of the first of what we hope will become an annual book forum. We asked Annette Atkins, Gregg Cantrell, and Elizabeth Sanders for their assessments and reactions to the book's major arguments. We asked them not so much for book reviews, of the sort more or less obligated to cover the book's sweep, but rather for assessments and reactions to some of its major arguments from the vantage point of their own expertise.<sup>2</sup> What can we learn from the NPL and Lansing's account, either because he lays out convincing and important arguments, or because he gets things wrong or misses major issues? Can studies of such past mobilizations inform contemporary politics? Or is the NPL (and perhaps the larger agrarian tradition of which it seems a continuation) no longer a generative one?

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doi:10.1017/S1537781416000487

Readers of this journal understand that of all the things historians do, forging a coherent interpretation from a mass of facts and evidence is the hardest. Most of us also recognize that the actual events that we study don't always lead us to a conclusion upon which all will agree. There is something about political history that renders the leap from evidence to interpretation particularly difficult. First, there is the gap between political rhetoric and actual political motivation. The reasons a politician or a voter gives for his or her actions and the real cause of those actions may be two very different things. Then there is the gap between what the leaders think, say, or do, and what motivates the rank and file. Political history is rife with examples of movements supposedly

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betrayed by the leaders, or of fickle followers who allowed their fears or prejudices to divert them from the path of political righteousness. In the American two-party system, where parties are invariably coalitions of the diverse, factionalization runs rife, leading to questions of who speaks for their party or movement, or whose beliefs are representative. Ultimately, many of the wellsprings of political behavior probably lie deep in the psyche of political actors, rooted in cultural factors such as religion, ethnicity, or gender. And as the relatively recent studies of collective memory have amply demonstrated, voters or politicians rarely give (or are even *able* to give) candid assessments of why they pursued some particular political course. Even vocabulary poses problems, as the meanings of words like “radical,” “liberal,” “conservative,” or “reactionary” are themselves highly contingent and contested.

The historiography of America’s agrarian movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been beset by these problems. An entire generation of Populism scholars more or less devoted itself to proving that Richard Hofstadter’s brilliant *Age of Reform* (1955) rested on a highly selective and unrepresentative reading of the documentary evidence. In the 1970s Lawrence Goodwyn offered the first sweeping reinterpretation of the Farmers’ Alliance and People’s Party, only to have a subsequent generation of scholars question whether the evidence truly supported his New Left interpretation of Populism as America’s last best (radical) hope for an alternative to liberal capitalism. If Hofstadter and Goodwyn teach us anything, it is that the agrarian revolt all too often comes off as something akin to a Rorschach test wherein the proffered interpretation tells us more about the historian than it does about the history itself.<sup>3</sup>

The latest contribution to the literature on America’s agrarian revolt by Michael J. Lansing partakes of its share of these problems. *Insurgent Democracy* is a painstakingly researched, gracefully written, and thoughtfully argued study of the Nonpartisan League, an agrarian movement based mainly in the upper Midwest, Plains, and Mountain states in the 1910s and 1920s. As a historian of southern Populism, I knew next to nothing about the NPL and am grateful to Lansing for educating me. Much of what I will say here falls into the category of devil’s advocacy—raising questions for the sake of argument—and should not really be construed as criticism. Lansing is to be applauded for taking on an ambitious and difficult task, and for wading into the agrarian revolt’s interpretive swamp with both feet. If I have questions about some of his conclusions, well, let’s just say it goes with the snake-infested territory.

Lansing’s argument is a nuanced one, and this can be both a strength and a weakness. In the main, his interpretation of the NPL is rather strikingly Goodwynesque: The League, he declares, insisted “on a moral economy premised on accumulation without concentration.” It “created an antimonomopolist popular politics for a rapidly urbanizing America,” and ultimately “it proposed an alternate future for American capitalism.” Lansing returns frequently to this theme, writing of the NPL’s commitment to “an alternative capitalist vision,” its efforts to extend “an agrarian vision of the cooperative society into politics,” and its championing of a producerist “moral imperative.” All of these characterizations of the NPL can be found, almost verbatim, in Goodwyn’s description of the Populists’ efforts to construct their putative “cooperative commonwealth.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet Lansing insists that the NPL was more than simply a “recapitulation of earlier forms of producer politics.” Its members, he claims, were “convinced that markets were the beating heart of the republican experiment,” and they “embraced modern

society.” Leaguers “remained thoroughly committed to capitalism and deeply committed to private property.” Their tactics reflected this modern streak. To sell memberships in the League, its principal leader, Arthur C. Townley, turned to a commission sales scheme borrowed straight from the modern corporation, complete with a fleet of Ford automobiles to make it all possible. The League seized upon a modern political innovation, the open, direct primary, in order to take over the old parties from within. The NPL’s autocratic, top-down administrative structure, Lansing notes, “combined contemporary corporate efficiencies with a critique of corporations.” In this emphasis on the NPL’s modernity, Lansing’s interpretation sounds much more like the one more recently posited for the Populists by Charles Postel in *The Populist Vision* than by Goodwyn.<sup>5</sup>

Nuance can be a good thing, but Lansing’s ambitious attempt to reconcile the NPL’s modernity with its “agrarian vision of the cooperative society” requires, in my mind at least, a considerable leap of faith. Let us begin with the principal goal of the original state League in North Dakota: to create a state-owned grain elevator and flour mill that would offer competition to the monopolistic private enterprises that regularly gouged hard-working farmers. To a historian of Populism like me, such demands seem roughly analogous to Texas Populists’ plan to have the state government build and operate a railroad trunk line from the Red River to the Gulf of Mexico in order to drive down freight rates. The first NPL-controlled legislature in North Dakota also created a state grain-grading system, a bank deposit guarantee act, and a state highway commission while imposing new railroad regulations, tripling funding for education, and supporting woman suffrage. Leaguers would also become big supporters of direct legislation and of income taxes. All of these reforms were advocated by Populists in the 1890s or by progressives after the turn of the century. Herein lies the interpretive conundrum. The radicalism of such policies—the extent to which they constitute the building blocks for some alternative (or cooperative) vision of American capitalism—exists largely in the eye of the beholder. One historian’s cooperative commonwealth may just as readily be another historian’s progressive or even proto-liberal state.<sup>6</sup>

In making the case for the NPL’s uniqueness and significance, Lansing argues that process was at least as important as policy. He vividly depicts the League as a genuine social movement, with farmers meeting frequently at the grassroots level, debating issues, and nominating their own for local and even state offices. “Working across ethnic and political differences,” he declares, “farmers began shedding a passive relationship with politics and embraced participatory democracy.” In the process, the League transformed rural communities and “fostered a new capacity for civic agency in rural precincts by changing farmers’ perceptions of what was possible.” Such grassroots activism instantly reminded me of Goodwyn’s 1880s-era Alliance “movement culture,” which itself was more or less successfully replicated by the People’s Party in the 1890s and by the post-1900 Farmers’ Union and other agrarian organizations. In fact, one could argue that brief flurries of enthusiastic grassroots organizing and activism, with all their attendant democratizing influences, have been a recurring feature of American political culture dating as far back as the boycotts of British tea in the Revolutionary Era. I do not doubt that popular politics had become ossified and the levers of power monopolized by self-interested elites in large swaths of the rural countryside in the early twentieth century, but the NPL’s brief revival of a genuinely democratic mass movement was not an unprecedented thing, nor would it be the last.<sup>7</sup>

I say “brief” for good reason. Founded in 1915, the NPL reached its peak influence right after World War I, began to fragment in 1920, and for all practical purposes was defunct by 1922. As a true electoral force it lasted all of four years, almost exactly the same as the short-lived Populist Party. The very brevity of the NPL calls into question Lansing’s assertion of its sweeping influence in American political life. The fact that it quickly gave way to other movements, including the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota and ultimately the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party of that state, suggests that, contrary to Lansing’s assertions, it more properly belongs as a chapter, albeit an important one, in the long and surprisingly consistent line of agrarian/labor political movements beginning with the Grange in the 1860s and continuing at least into the 1940s.<sup>8</sup>

Lansing concludes with a somewhat damning critique of New Deal liberalism, suggesting that old Leaguers and like-minded agrarians found themselves at odds with Roosevelt’s bureaucratically administered farm programs that favored larger producers. The small family farmers who had formed the backbone of the NPL sacrificed their independence for the comforts of the welfare state. Lansing is eloquent on this point:

Ultimately, economic want trumped other concerns. The moral imperative of the old middle class—that small property-owning farmers held a central place in the social and cultural fabric of the nation by producing the source of all wealth—gave way to the demand that rural prosperity mattered as much as urban prosperity. ... Simultaneously proud to persist and embarrassed by relief, farm families lived out contradictions that gradually undercut the world they knew.<sup>9</sup>

Both of my grandfathers were dry-land cotton farmers on the South Plains of Texas in the 1930s. One, who owned his land, took full advantage of those New Deal farm programs and amassed a comfortable fortune as a gentleman farmer. The other, who did not own his land, quit farming and became a truck driver. But thanks to New Deal liberalism, both were able to move into town in the 1940s, leaving behind the dirt and isolation of the farm to live in comfortable houses with electricity and running water. In their small town, they had church and neighbors and lived to see their children graduate from decent public high schools. As far as I can tell, neither ever yearned for the lost agrarian community—the “moral economy”—of Populism or the Nonpartisan League.

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doi:10.1017/S1537781416000499

Decades ago, I eagerly read Robert Morlan’s book *Political Prairie Fire*, like many other Midwesterners of my generation, thrilled to the film *Northern Lights*.<sup>10</sup> In them I found a compelling story of the Socialist Nonpartisan League and its brief flash in North Dakota. These radical farmers took over state government, established a state bank and state mill, and disappeared when the super patriotic fervor of World War I turned Americans against all dissidents and the farmers lost faith in their cause. I did wonder from time to time how North Dakota had turned so Red Republican so quickly after being so red radical, without getting to a hypothesis. In those post-Vietnam war years, I wanted a historical example where radicals flourished. In the

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post-post-Vietnam years I was consoled that another radical movement had also vanished. This was as deeply as I put history to use in that instance.

In *Insurgent Democracy*, Michael J. Lansing persuasively demonstrates that each piece of this account of the NPL is wrong (and so was my “use” of history). As he makes clear, it was the Nonpartisan League, not the *Socialist* NPL. Its leaders and members embraced capitalism and championed the get-ahead ambitions of capitalist America, they just wanted a better chance to get ahead themselves. As they saw it, “[the] government seemed to stand in the way rather than respond to the will and needs of the people,” so they needed to fix the government in order to give themselves a better chance to win. Their main goal, Lansing argues, was “to improve their chances in the marketplace.”<sup>11</sup> They supported state-run banks and mills as an antimonopoly strategy. The organization defined itself as “nonpartisan” to emphasize its eagerness to work with either political party, to keep from being held captive by either, and to press the parties to respond better to voters. While farmers constituted the core membership, the NPL cultivated alliances with other proto-capitalists and often gave a cold shoulder to socialists and socialism. Finally, although the organization had its greatest successes in North Dakota, the membership stretched throughout the American Midwest and Canadian prairie provinces. This cogent corrective provides one excellent reason to read this book.

Another—and I think a more important one—is Lansing’s penetrating analysis of how and why NPL people invested themselves in the politics of reform.

As elections are currently carried on, the economy usually takes center stage. When he ran for the presidency in 1980, Ronald Reagan crystalized his critique of Jimmy Carter’s term in office by asking, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” In 1992, strategist James Carville reminded his candidate Governor Bill Clinton, “The Economy, Stupid.” Both strategies proved so successful that they’ve been echoed in every election since. In this interpretive fog, we have adopted a simple economic understanding of “better off,” with the implication that anything else is “stupid.” No wonder contemporary politics is so confusing and pundits keep being surprised when people vote against their supposed economic self-interest. Lansing gives us some clues. He might well say, “It’s the ideas, stupid.” And the central idea has to do with work.

Writer Joyce Carol Oates observed, “Homo sapiens is the species that invents symbols in which to invest passion and authority, then forgets that symbols are inventions.”<sup>12</sup> Ideas about the nobility of work number among those inventions. Work is a “fact” of sorts, of course, but for centuries westerners have with passion and authority elevated it to an excessively powerful symbol—of God’s favor, of one’s worth and worthiness, one’s gender adherence, one’s place in society, one’s abilities, one’s values, and one’s value. Indeed, we have elevated it to being one of the most potent symbols in American mythology.

So powerful, in fact, that we distort other “truths” and “facts” in order to reinforce our idea that work equals success, that work makes the man, that work is noble, indeed, that work will set us free. We then use wealth as an indicator of work. By this measure rich people are presumed to have worked hard and poor people presumed to be lazy—no matter the evidence (the inherited wealth of some on the one hand and the inadequacy of a minimum wage job to support a family on the other). We judge that people get ahead through their own efforts so people who don’t get ahead must be at fault for not doing so. We have turned work into “jobs” and defined child rearing as “not working.” We discriminate against people in hiring and promotions and then criticize

the applicants for lack of ambition. We refer to picking yourself up by your bootstraps accounts as “Horatio Alger stories,” forgetting that *Ragged Dick* and other Alger heroes got ahead through luck and marrying the rich man’s daughter, not through work.

The “we” here has a special U.S. intensity, too. In the United Kingdom, it is common knowledge that different attitudes toward work have tripped up otherwise smooth-sailing mergers between U.S. and British firms (and sunk mergers between U.S. and French ones). In the UK, similarly, one does not ask in polite society, “What do you do?”—the traditional mark of a gentleman being one who does not have to work. Better to ask about gardening or the theatre. In the United States it is our first question (theater and the arts still consigned vaguely to the world of women and leisure) and we seem to believe, if we know a person’s work, that we know their whole personality profile.

As Daniel T. Rodgers brilliantly explains in his book, *The Work Ethic in Industrializing America, 1850–1920*, this ethic of work strengthened, just as industrialization hollowed out much of what had previously made work satisfying and meaningful.<sup>13</sup> Sewing thousands of identical pieces of leather or linen gave back nothing of the pride of actually making a shoe or a dress.

Rodgers focuses on what happened to work values when they met the buzz saw of mechanization and focuses on shoemakers and seamstresses and other early factory workers. He does not examine what happened when they too faced the forces of industrialization, but does argue that farmers were among the strongest proponents of elevated ideas about work in nineteenth-century America. Indeed, he categorizes them with “[northern and Protestant] merchants, ministers and professional men, independent craftsmen, and nascent industrialists” as helping to define and propagate the work ethic, that is, a “commitment to the moral primacy of work.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Lansing accepts the significance of economic issues in politics—especially among members of the NPL who talked so much about them—but he insists that we see, as the NPL members did, that what mattered was the “moral economy,” the ideas that the farmers held about themselves, their place and value in society, the right role of government, fairness, and especially about work and a host of related values: independence, fairness, individualism, “self-determined manhood,” and democracy. These were men of ideas who built an organization bent on asserting and supporting farmers just as their work and life were being “hollowed out” by the effects of industrialization and urbanization.<sup>15</sup>

In *Insurgent Democracy* Lansing shows that it was ideas that fueled the NPL and, by analogy, some of the same ideas that shape other elections, too, whatever the pundits say. The disaffected—then and now—are not simply people without resources: they are people who have felt disappointed that how they thought the world was supposed to work turns out not to be the case. They are often people who—having worked hard and played by the rules—feel entitled to a success and cultural prominence that is being denied to them.

The third reason to read Lansing’s book is his compelling explanation of how historians and politicians alike came to embrace the interpretation of the NPL that I laid out at the beginning of this essay. As he writes, “If we remember the NPL in conventional ways, it offers us little. But if we bring more nuanced visions to bear the legacies of the League point us toward an innovative approach to democracy and the economy.” Morlan and “Northern Lights” and, indeed, New Deal Liberals presented a story of the NPL that

robbed it of what was truly radical, its non-socialist vision of an “alternate future for American capitalism” expressed by citizens who supported American ideas and ideals: mainstream people who called on government to deliver on the promise of America. The Morlan/*Northern Lights*/New Deal accounts defang the NPL, relegate it to the category of a “lost tradition,” and blind us to the political possibilities of the organization and movement.<sup>16</sup>

There is one more reason to read this book: for its clear argument and organization, expansive research, close reading of documents, lucid writing, and clear thinking. This book offers a kind of manifesto about how to do history, how to explore historical events more deeply, how to think about the power of history, how to work with powerful symbols that have shaped and continue to shape the United States. History students could well use it as a model for doing history.

Elizabeth Sanders

doi:10.1017/S1537781416000505

Michael J. Lansing’s *Insurgent Democracy* is a finely detailed, thoroughly researched book on an insurgent organization that had a major impact on the Dakotas, Montana, Minnesota, and adjacent Canadian providences from the Progressive Era to the New Deal and beyond.

We are living today in another remarkable political era in which insurgent candidates have—as did the NPL—used the primary process to mount a large-scale protest against major party elites and try to reverse the direction of national public policy in an era of growing inequality. Such protests are episodic, though on the scale of 1916 and 2016, seldom seen.

The Trump and Sanders voters are not agrarians, and only weakly connected to the labor movement; their issues (trade treaties, immigration, campaign finance, the cost of education, and climate change) are very different, but they could be said to share the agrarian anti-elitist instincts and strategies of the Greenbackers, Grange, Antimonopoly parties, Farmers Alliance, Populists, Socialists, Nonpartisan League, and Farmer-Labor Parties of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bernie Sanders, a Socialist like the founders of the NPL, would certainly be recognizable to a NPL gathering.

This is a long and important reform tradition, one that has been responsible for a language of democratization and laws that are with us still. For those reasons, it is valuable to have a new book that elaborates so much that was missing in earlier work on the Midwestern radical tradition. Ideological groups and corporate power have swept much of this radical history from American textbooks and historical memory. Most college students know little about the radical movements that roiled the country at critical points, leaving a democratic policy legacy imitated far beyond U.S. shores. This tradition is truly a major aspect of “American Exceptionalism,” but most Americans know little of the dynamic agrarian and labor movements that struggled with powerful elites to improve democracy, even when that history was made in their own backyards.

Michael J. Lansing deserves praise for this major addition to the literature of agrarian and labor reform.

Most valuable to me in his book are the detail, the rich archival research, and the expansion of NPL research beyond North Dakota—particularly to Minnesota (which was both the location of NPL class enemies in the early twentieth century, and the arena for the post-World War II transformation of the farmer-labor movement that nested its values and coalition in a major U.S. party), and to Canada, whose less encumbered politics made possible a stronger national legacy (in particular, national health insurance). However, the temporal and geographical reach of *Insurgent Democracy* sometimes makes it a difficult read. The narrative moves backward and forward in time, and the reader sometimes forgets where and when the account is located. More sub-headings would help, or perhaps even consolidation in state chapters. Canada gets its own chapter and it is much easier to follow than most others. Political scientists would appreciate seeing a few tables categorically summarizing similarities and differences in NPL movement strength, alliances, and tactics across place and time, along with major electoral victories and legislative accomplishments in the different states and Canada.

Such categorization might help to answer questions about NPL strengths in, for example, North and South Dakota. Were there more, and more successful competing farm groups in South Dakota, as well as major parties that responded earlier to mobilized farmer demands, thus diminishing some of the attraction of the NPL there? Was Canadian federalism friendlier to agrarian reform movements than the political structures across the border?

One mystery concerns the role of women. I kept writing in the margins, “What about women members?” When finally the text turns to the issue of women in the North Dakota NPL, it is clear that they were marginalized. That calls up comparisons with earlier farmer and labor movements like the Grange, Farmers Alliance, Populists, and Farmers Union where historical accounts and organizational minutes suggest that women were much more integrated in those organizations, despite extremely limited suffrage. Was that because the more participatory and less centralized organizations of earlier agrarian movements permitted women to participate in more meaningful ways? Did the NPL’s emphasis on money-raising affect its openness to women and their interests?

Women voted earlier in South Dakota than North Dakota, and women had full (national) suffrage earlier in Canada than in North Dakota. Perhaps that is one reason the North Dakota NPL leaders were apparently so uninterested in recruiting women members, compared to Canadian and South Dakota agrarian organizations. Or perhaps the NPL neglect of women was simply the result of its direction by a very small group of men who made the organization’s policy; chose its strategy; and spent, more or less as they wished, the money from the very substantial dues paid to the NPL in North Dakota. Did the small leadership clique that controlled organizational policy simply have little interest in recruiting or using the talents of women? Was the Canadian organization blessed with more idealistic, less-self-serving leaders, more immersed in social gospel teachings? (J. S. Woodsworth, a Methodist minister, Socialist, and antiwar activist who became the first leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, is a case in point).<sup>17</sup> This kind of farmer’s organization would probably have been more appealing to women than the autocratic, male-dominated North Dakota NPL.



The financial costs of joining the NPL were hefty. Lansing gives two figures for dues required of North Dakota members—\$6 a year, followed by \$16 for a biennial membership. The first would be substantial for a small-to-middling farmer in the Nineteens—\$6 in 1915 would amount to \$143 in 2016 dollars. Once dues reached \$16, that would be \$382 in today's currency. The organization “mimicked the methods of efficiency-oriented companies,” Lansing writes, and “enrolled members provided the organization with hundreds of thousands of dollars.”<sup>18</sup> It is amazing that Arthur Townley and Albert Bowen were so successful in recruiting members at these extraordinary dues levels, and that despite bad publicity and persistent complaints about the leaders' incomes and NPL-furnished automobiles, members were apparently never willing or able to demand more transparency and require broader participation in NPL decision-making. It is possible that the League's success was perceived by NPL members and voters as so valuable to their communities and personal incomes that the high dues and autocratic direction were acceptable costs.

By the time the NPL emerged in 1915, advances in transportation and communication techniques (including the growth of high-pressure salesmanship methods) contributed to differences between the NPL and earlier radical agrarian movements. But so, it would seem, did personality differences. Arthur Townley's crude cynicism seems to show on his face in the portrait Lansing includes. “Make the rubes pay their god-damn money to join,” no matter what you have to tell them, he is quoted as advising recruiters. They were urged to discover “the damn fool's hobby . . . , and then talk it. If he likes religion, talk Jesus Christ; if he is against the government, damn the democrats; if he is afraid of whiskey, preach prohibition; if he wants to talk hogs, talk hogs—talk anything he'll listen to, but talk, talk, until you get his god-damn John Hancock to a check.” A Montana professor may have put it charitably when he remarked that the NPL was motivated by a “spirit of compromise,” and showed a “lesser regard for theory” than most agrarian insurgencies. Albert Bowen, who first broached the idea of a new, *programmatic* organization for farmers, was by far the more idealistic of the two founders. But Townley was the driven organization man, willing to join Bowen in the NPL project “only if he could be the absolute boss.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the differences in leader-member relationships between earlier radical agrarian movements and the NPL do seem striking. I am not aware of accounts of Grange, Farmers Alliance, or Farmers Union leadership that used the word “despotic” in describing group leadership. Certainly the Farmers Alliance and Knights of Labor did not have organization cars at their disposal; but did they even get salaries or commissions like the NFL leaders secured for themselves? Did it make a difference that by 1915, the electorate had shrunk as a percentage of the adult male population, and NPL members and voters were probably more prosperous than their counterparts in the Grange, Antimonopoly, Farmers Alliance, and Knights of Labor? In short, was the NPL a socialist-leaning organization for middle and upper-middle class farmers who simply saw the movement as a smart economic proposition for lowering (or replacing) the costs imposed by merchant and corporate middlemen and banks? Perhaps some future economic historian will investigate these costs and benefits.

These questions (and implied criticisms of League leaders) arise in part because Lansing focuses on leaders more than followers. Of course, while newspaper accounts and memoranda by and about leaders are plentiful, it is not as easy to find out about

members—their lives, struggles, and thoughts. In the case of the Grange and Farmers Union, there are minutes of meetings that reveal the degree of participation by members, including women. Marilyn Watkins's fine book on the Western Washington Grange exploits a wealth of empirical data (including useful comparative tables) to lay out the role of women in the Grange.<sup>20</sup> Are NPL minutes less complete, more secretive? Or did the dominance of the small leadership group extend to control of member contributions in meetings, and official recordkeeping? Or, again, was the small, tight leadership of the men who ran the North Dakota NPL, and had a large influence on its expansion to other states, simply unwilling to allow women an active role in the organization? The same question might be asked about what seems a weaker and later NPL appreciation of the advantage of forming political alliances with labor organizations compared with the earlier farmer movements. This was particularly odd for ex-Socialists.

Students of earlier agrarian and labor movements, and the civil rights movement, advanced social movement theory by describing the “cognitive liberation” (Doug McAdam's term in his *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*) that takes place in social movement organizations with face-to-face conversation, a system of political education (see Theodore Mitchell's *Political Education in the Southern Farmers' Alliance*) and methods for overcoming the “free rider” effect with solidarity-building cooperation and recruitment of already-existing groups.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, Lansing's book, with its focus on leaders, slighting member interactions and mobilization methods, makes incorporation of his NFL study into social movement theory rather difficult.

Aside from greater participation by women and less autocratic leadership, Canadian farmers' organizations also seem to have suffered less persecution during World War I. Is that because of budding differences in international relations between the two North American governments? Before the war, federalism was a political structure that allowed state-level agrarian radicalism to flourish in the United States, but after April 1917, a president intent on both a new international leadership role and on squelching the powerful pre-1917 antiwar sentiment in the United States turned federalism into a double-edged sword. Decentralized state and local Councils of Defense empowered class enemies of agrarian radical organizations to persecute “unpatriotic” groups that had opposed U.S. entry into World War I—and that included many farmer organizations and labor unions.

Lansing's book brings out of obscurity the local dynamics of the Red Scare as Wilson's war policy cleverly unleashed local hysteria and propelled it against groups with a socialist tinge. It is well to remember that it was not just labor organizations and leaders who suffered from this repression. County attorneys in Minnesota were especially aggressive against the NPL. Townley and another former Socialist NPL organizer were charged with interfering with military enlistments by distributing League pamphlets, and denied the right to speak in their own defense. The Supreme Court in *Gilbert v. Minnesota* ruled, in “a low point in the history of American civil liberties” that “the [war] emergency allowed the state to curb particular constitutional rights.”<sup>22</sup> Marilyn Watkins complements Lansing's account of the war's role in empowering the opposition to reform. As she puts it, and Lansing would surely agree, before the war (and the Russian Revolution it triggered), “activist farmers had been viewed by their more conservative neighbors and townfolk primarily as misguided fools, not as a threat to American democracy.”<sup>23</sup>

That the American NPL survived two years of Red Scare was a credit to the strength of its organization, and the determination of farmers not to let war-manufactured conservatism derail their reform projects. But one cannot avoid asking how much more resilient the League would have been had the leaders’ “overreach” and “tight hold on the reigns of power” not turned so many natural friends into enemies.<sup>24</sup>

The final chapter of *Insurgent Democracy* reminds us of its legacies, despite these flaws. The NPL ultimately “established the legality and promise of state-owned enterprises” (the North Dakota State Bank and state flour mill are with us still, and the former has won praise for its economic leadership and avoidance of the problems that brought down so many financial institutions in the Great Recession); the effectiveness of cooperatives; the value of institutionalized challenges to party elites; and it “fused farmer and labor interests into powerful third parties in both the United States and Canada,” launching “the careers of insurgent US senators who wielded influence in that body into the late 1930s.”<sup>25</sup>

Those are hefty accomplishments and this new accounting of the lasting contributions of agrarian radicalism, and the “agrarian moral economy” in the plains and prairies justly restores its reputation. (It is unfortunate that the cultural capstone of an important 1978 film about the North Dakota Nonpartisan League, *Northern Lights*, will be seen by too few people because of tight control by its corporate distributor).

Lansing’s broader philosophical analysis of the seemingly inevitable transformation of this American radical tradition (Chester McArthur Destler called it American democratic radicalism or “indigenous” American radicalism)<sup>26</sup> in the 1950s puts forward interesting arguments about the way “Midcentury liberals [Hubert Humphrey may be the paradigmatic example, but perhaps we should also consider Hillary Clinton as a probable descendant] rejected older visions of civic agency in favor of centralized, technical, bureaucratic power.” Theodore Lowi’s label for this transformation was “interest group liberalism.”<sup>27</sup> This post-World War II manifestation is hardly a triumph of liberalism: government power serves agribusiness, and land grant universities promote GMOs and new pesticides, woefully neglecting small organic farmers trying to get a foothold in the great rural expanses hollowed out by “free trade” treaties no agrarian would endorse.

But the 2016 revolts led by the odd couple of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump remind us that you can’t fool all the people all the time, and parties—the great engines of democracy—can be strongly challenged when they forget the common folk. It happens.

## INSURGENCIES AND DEMOCRACY

Michael J. Lansing

doi:10.1017/S1537781416000517

I am honored that this discussion of *Insurgent Democracy* inaugurates a new and exciting annual feature in the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. I am also thankful

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for three generous but clear-eyed colleagues who engaged the book so thoughtfully. I hope their smart commentary and careful critique spur a conversation that extends far beyond the pages of this journal.

I never intended to write a book about dead (mostly) white, farmers. After all, it is not the sexiest subject. Furthermore, I am a social and environmental historian. I never envisioned writing political history. But the convolutions of the first decade of the 2000s—endless war, ecological catastrophe, and economic crisis—drew me to the subject. I came to believe that any effort to address those three problems (and a host of others) depended largely on addressing the underlying issues in political economy, then and now. That demanded a close look at democracy's relationship to corporate capitalism. The story of the Nonpartisan League (NPL) shows that the late 1910s and early 1920s proved to be a pivotal moment in that relationship. Even as corporations consolidated their hold on the American economy and elites redefined American democracy as a system that required expertise, engaged citizens kept practicing democracy in everyday life.

The story also demanded a wider conversation. I wanted to write a book that would do work in the broader world even as it served academic audiences. My own feminist training, the social criticism of Christopher Lasch, and a conscious effort to participate in the historiographical tradition outlined by David S. Brown in *Beyond the Frontier* convinced me that I could try to do both.<sup>28</sup> Reaching out to a broader public and directly engaging pressing questions is not just a publishing imperative. It is also a moral imperative.

This approach complicated my relation to historiography. Gregg Cantrell is absolutely right to note that *Insurgent Democracy* incorporates insights from both Lawrence Goodwyn and Charles Postel. Archival evidence made it clear that the NPL grew out of the Society of Equity (a multistate cooperative organization) and created a powerful movement culture. Simultaneously, it also suggested that the farmers in the Nonpartisan League firmly engaged rather than rejected the latest in modern industrial culture. Despite the differences between them, both Goodwyn and Postel helped me to understand the origins and dynamism of the NPL.

Perhaps such straddling seems like intellectual inconsistency. I made no effort to reconcile the differences because I was not especially interested in intervening in the historiography of Populism (though I became intimately familiar with it). Instead, I wanted to contribute to the much more loosely defined historiography of democracy in American life. The two overlap, but remain distinct.

The sprawling body of work on democracy transcends specific periods and popular movements. It includes books such as Sara Evans's and Harry Boyte's *Free Spaces*, Francesca Polletta's *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*, Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, Terry Bouton's *Taming Democracy*, and Kyle Volk's *Moral Minorities*.<sup>29</sup> Closer to home for readers of this journal, Robert Westbrook's *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Kevin Mattson's *Creating a Democratic Public*, and Robert Johnston's *The Radical Middle Class* examine related questions.<sup>30</sup> All (and many unmentioned others) make signal contributions to our understanding of the contested definitions of democratic citizenship and the intimately related struggle to define economic and social relations.

Democracy can be defined in multiple ways. For better or worse, *Insurgent Democracy* represents an attempt to better understand the history of civic agency. Civic agency, as political scientist Laura Grattan defines it in her book *Populism's Power*,

encapsulates “an alternative tradition of radical democratic populism rooted in everyday politics and institutional experimentation” and focuses on “how democratic peoples should enact their power in politics.”<sup>31</sup> It is about the capacity of regular people to work together across differences in identity and ideology, identify their shared self-interest, ascertain where power lies, and to create change.

Indeed, as classics scholar Josiah Ober points out, the Greek terms from which the word democracy originated do not refer to “people power” but instead the “empowered people.” They refer to citizens with the capacity to not just “control ... a public realm but the collective strength and ability to act within that realm and, indeed, to reconstitute the public realm through action.”<sup>32</sup> This tradition, explored by political theorists such as Sheldon Wolin, Michael Sandel, and Harry Boyte, as well as the short-lived journal *Democracy* (1981–1983) and the current journal *The Good Society*, offers new perspectives on how to imagine American democracy, past and present.

Most historians know that the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (however construed) proved to be a turning point in American popular politics. Despite works such as Christopher Cappazola’s *Uncle Sam Wants You*, the pivotal post-World War I shift in how many envisioned citizens’ relationship to democracy itself is less well-known.<sup>33</sup> It grew out of what Linda Gordon once identified as “the anti-democratic promotion of expertise in politics” during the Progressive Era.<sup>34</sup> The late 1910s and early 1920s became a pivotal moment in which corporate power consolidated its hold on the American economy even as elites redefined American democracy as something that demanded experts rather than easily manipulated, if actively engaged, citizens.

The recent insurgencies led by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders created an uptick of popular interest in and speculation about American popular politics. Yet we need to more closely examine the state of democracy today, not populisms. In other words, instead of debating whether or not Trump and Sanders supporters were populists or Populists, we should focus our attention on the deterioration and potential renewal of civic agency in a profoundly corporate and cynical age. This means expanding our political imagination and broadening our political discourse. Reconsidering the past helps us envision what might be possible.

Work is a significant component of civic agency. Its proponents call for people to make democracy an everyday affair, especially in their professions. I greatly appreciate Annette Atkins’s recognition of the moral significance of work in the Nonpartisan League. Catherine Stock’s *Main Street in Crisis* outlines the powerful ways in which work related to class and gender in Northern Plains culture in early twentieth-century America.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, a commitment to a fair chance in the marketplace drove agrarian men and women to not only transcend their cynicism about electoral politics but also call for what we might today refer to as a public option. It even put Leaguers to work to enact equity and fairness in their own ethnically and religiously diverse communities.

Everyday democracy—then and now—draws from and demands engagement with some of our central assumptions about work. Indeed, as Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* suggests, the difference between mobilization and organization matters greatly.<sup>36</sup> *Insurgent Democracy* points out that mobilizing involves “identifying voter desires, honing a pitch, and seizing the moment” while organizing depends on the more difficult work of “education, consciousness raising, and building solidarity” to produce long-term commitments.<sup>37</sup> The NPL’s success at the latter resonates today. In

2016—nearly one hundred years after the League’s first electoral victories—I watched the grandchildren and great grandchildren of NPL stalwarts in North Dakota lay claim to the anti-corporate message of their forbearers as they chanted the League’s slogan (“We’ll Stick, We’ll Win”) at the Democratic-NPL Party state convention’s luncheon in Bismarck.

Elizabeth Sanders correctly points out both the anti-elitism and geographic reach of the Nonpartisan League. The NPL—in its initial iteration, a movement for democracy but not necessarily a democratically organized movement—highlighted the unequal power of corporations in agricultural marketplaces. It drew on a long-standing tradition of resistance to concentrated power even as it invented innovative electoral tactics to achieve that aim. The League reminds us that anti-elitism can be expressed in diverse ways, both then and today.

Furthermore, the NPL’s success in taking over the Democratic Party in both Idaho (1918) and Colorado (1920) shows the power of its platform-centered, non-party, equity-oriented politics to transcend region. In fact, because the League grew out of the shared economic concerns of diverse ethnic communities of wheat farmers in what Molly Rozum calls the northern grasslands—an area that roughly encompasses western Minnesota, both Dakotas, much of Nebraska and Montana, and large portions of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta—the League stands out as one of the few transnational political organizations in North American history.<sup>38</sup>

Though the NPL fizzled out in Saskatchewan, it transformed the politics of neighboring Alberta. In Canada, both the social gospel and the immediate appeal to women marked the League there as distinct from the NPL in the United States. In a profoundly different political context (at both the federal and provincial levels), nonpartisanship, popular political participation, and equity in wheat markets appealed to many in the Prairie Provinces. William Irvine, leader of the Alberta NPL, engaged labor and farm politics only after careful training in the social gospel at Winnipeg’s Wesley College and corresponding stints as a Methodist and then Unitarian minister. As Ian McKay’s *Reasoning Otherwise* makes clear, Irvine’s fascinating *The Farmers in Politics* articulated an anti-party, cooperative, citizen-centered, and religious reform perspective that deserves much more attention from Canadian and American historians alike.<sup>39</sup>

After the Alberta NPL elected the first woman to a legislative body in the British Empire—the suffragist and WCTU leader Louise McKinney—Irvine pushed the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) to enter formal politics and merged the League into that organization in order to force the issue. Embraced from the start, women fueled much of that effort. As a result, the UFA ruled the province from 1921–1935. Meanwhile, Irvine not only served in the House of Commons but also cofounded the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) with a host of other agrarian and labor leaders. James Naylor’s *The Fate of Labour Socialism* lays out the transformations in that party that led to Canada’s modern health care system as well as the less radical, if still significant, New Democratic Party.<sup>40</sup>

Close attention to the Canadian iterations of the NPL makes clear the significance of gender in the League’s story on both sides of the border. Agrarian conceptions of manhood—premised on economic independence, property ownership, and patriarchal families—became the foundation of the NPL’s initial appeal in the United States. Despite rural women’s profound contributions to a farm’s success and their intense

interest in political and social change, the League largely ignored them until universal suffrage and political survival forced its hand. Then it reversed itself. Farm women rushed to join the NPL. There they not only empowered themselves but also democratized the movement. They even transformed themselves from voters into politicians. By 1922, League-backed women ran for local and state offices in Nebraska, Montana, Colorado, North Dakota, Washington, Minnesota, and—most notably—for governor in South Dakota. In a political moment saturated with gender issues and examples of misogyny, this history matters.

Finally, I am thankful that all three commentators point out my effort to understand the NPL's relation to what followed, as well as how it has been remembered. *Insurgent Democracy's* take on mid-century Midwestern liberalism (which laid claim to the NPL's citizen-centered democracy despite its establishment of bureaucratically oriented interest-group politics) surely will ruffle the feathers of those who emphasize the continuity between the Progressive Era and the New Deal. It might also trouble staunch liberals (with whom I sympathize) anxious to restore New Deal and Great Society-style public policies in a conservative era. Yet, as Catherine Stock recently reminded readers of this journal, accepted understandings of rural responses to the New Deal and America's entry into World War II need to be reexamined. Usually voiced by anti-bureaucratic and anti-militarist politicians first elected by the NPL, the motivations behind their message might help us make more sense of the present.<sup>41</sup> Their slogan—"America First"—appropriated by Donald Trump's campaign to articulate an anti-immigrant stance, has a more complicated history than we know.

All told, *Insurgent Democracy* attempts to use the past to carefully consider the present. Some colleagues remain uncomfortable with such explicit aims. One anonymous referee referred to the book's conclusion as something better fit "for an article in *The Progressive* or *The Nation* than ... a scholarly book." But I took this critique as a compliment. I set out to engage in careful research and reflection and yet retain a forceful engagement with present-day questions that might help inform public discourse. This impulse led me to publish commentaries derived from the book's insights in local as well as national media.<sup>42</sup> As educators and scholars in a nation that aspires to democracy, our commitment to improve that democracy must be as strong as our commitment to disciplinary methods, archival evidence, and peer review. Besides, as John Dewey suggested long ago, "the segregation which kills the vitality of history is divorce from present modes and concerns of social life."<sup>43</sup> Given the state of the nation and world today, those of us who study the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era bear a special responsibility to avoid exactly that.

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Annette Atkins, *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2006); Gregg Cantrell, *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Gregg Cantrell, "'Our Very Pronounced Theory of Equal Rights to All': Race, Citizenship, and Populism in the South Texas Borderlands," *Journal of American History* 100:3 (2013): 663–90; M. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup>Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, x, 29, 156–57, 262; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, xv.

<sup>5</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, ix, x, 22, 240; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 157.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 154; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 88.

<sup>8</sup>On the Farmer-Labor and Democratic Farmer-Labor parties, see Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 250–52, 266.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>10</sup>Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915–1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955); John Hanson and Rob Nilsson, *Northern Lights* (1978).

<sup>11</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 11, 22.

<sup>12</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, “The Calendar’s New Clothes,” *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 1999, at <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/30/opinion/the-calendar-s-new-clothes.html> (accessed June 22, 2016).

<sup>13</sup>Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrializing America, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>14</sup>Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrializing America*, xi, xii, 16.

<sup>15</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 19.

<sup>16</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 240, xi.

<sup>17</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 52.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 69–70; see [usinflationcalculator.com](http://www.usinflationcalculator.com)

<sup>19</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 14, 44, 18; for Townley’s quote, see MN Historical Society, <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/m0182.pdf>

<sup>20</sup>Marilyn P. Watkins, *Rural Democracy: Family Farmers and Politics in Western Washington, 1890–1925* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup>Doug McAdams, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Theodore Mitchell, *Political Education in the Southern Farmers’ Alliance, 1887–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*; Michael Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure: Southern Farmer’s Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880–90* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup>Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy*, 129–30.

<sup>23</sup>Lansing, 129–30; Watkins, 154.

<sup>24</sup>Lansing, 237.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>26</sup>*American Radicalism, 1865–1901: Essays and Documents* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963).

<sup>27</sup>*The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

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<sup>29</sup>Sara Evans and Harry Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kyle G. Volk, *Moral Minorities and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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<sup>31</sup>Laura Grattan, *Populism’s Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15, 33.



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<sup>32</sup>Josiah Ober, "The Original Meaning of 'Democracy': Capacity to Do Things, Not Majority Rule," *Constellations* 15:1 (Mar. 2008): 3–9.

<sup>33</sup>Christopher Cappozola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>34</sup>Linda Gordon, "If the Progressives Were Advising Us Today, Should We Listen?" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1:2 (Apr. 2002): 114.

<sup>35</sup>Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup>Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>37</sup>Michael J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 45.

<sup>38</sup>Molly Rozum, *Northern Grasslands Grown: Sense of Place and Regional Identity on North America's Canadian Prairies and American Plains*, forthcoming, University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>39</sup>Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008); and William Irvine, *The Farmer in Politics* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1920).

<sup>40</sup>James Naylor, *The Fate of Labour Socialism: The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the Dream of a Working-Class Future* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

<sup>41</sup>Catherine McNicol Stock, "Making War Their Business: The Short History of Populist Anti-Militarism," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13:3 (July 2014): 387–99.

<sup>42</sup>Michael J. Lansing, "A Second Gilded Age at Last?" *MinnPost*, Feb. 11, 2016, <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2016/02/second-gilded-age-last>; Michael J. Lansing, "To Understand This Summer, Look Not to 1968, but '79," *MinnPost*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2016/07/understand-summer-look-not-1968-79>; and Harry C. Boyte and Michael J. Lansing, "'We the People' in the Era of Trump," *BillMoyers.com*, Apr. 5, 2016, <http://billmoyers.com/story/we-the-people-in-the-era-of-trump/>

<sup>43</sup>John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1916), 250.