



The Rise of Populism and Socialism featuring Oliver Anthony

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What criticism did the Populist and Socialist Party have of the U.S. government and economy at the turn of the century, what solutions did they offer, and how have musicians since made similar critiques?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students examine charts, analyze political cartoons, and recite excerpts of political speeches to uncover the Populist and Socialist parties' critiques of, and solutions to, economic issues confronting Americans in the late 1800s. They also compare the critiques of the Populist and Socialist parties to Oliver Anthony's 2023 song "The Rich Men North of Richmond" to determine if the issues underlying these historic movements are still relevant today.



Keppler, Udo J., Artist. A noisy mob; - but the sound money police are closing in on them / Keppler. , 1896. N.Y.: Published by Keppler & Schwarzmann, September 2. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2012648468/>.

In August 2023, Christopher Anthony Lunsford—known by his stage name Oliver Anthony—was propelled into stardom after releasing a video of his song, “The Rich Men North of Richmond” on the YouTube channel radiowv. The video became a viral hit, and the song soon topped streaming charts and debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.

While Anthony’s powerful vocals and songwriting ability certainly aided the song’s popularity, the lyrics to “The Rich Men North of Richmond” seemed to have tapped into a feeling many shared about the state of U.S. politics and society at the time—as evident by the prolific and often contentious discussion around the song’s lyrics on social media and in the press. In short, the lyrics to the song portray a juxtaposition between the poverty of honest, hard working Americans and the enormous wealth and corruption of politicians and the politically well-connected in Washington D.C., the city almost directly north of Richmond, Virginia. It is a struggle Anthony, who worked various industrial factory jobs before his career as a musician, has certainly experienced.

In the song, Anthony seems to attribute the difficulties working class people are forced to contend with as a part of “Livin’ in the new world.” But historians may have grounds to disagree with this notion. In U.S. history, one can easily find similarities between the message in “The Rich Men North of Richmond” and the messages delivered over one hundred years ago by figures such as Mary E. Lease, Eugene V. Debs, and William Jennings Bryan. Lease, Bryan, and Debs all lived



during a similar time of great upheaval, when technological innovation disrupted the U.S. economy and threatened the financial stability of working people.

Despite different upbringings, Bryan, Debs, and Lease landed upon roughly the same diagnoses for the American economy at the turn of the century: that wealthy industrialists had rigged the economy and corrupted politicians so that they could attain ever higher wealth, while workers and farmers increasingly struggled. Gifted orators, each figure barnstormed the country spreading their message, and in the process, helped create the Populist and Socialist parties.

Born to Irish immigrants in 1850, Mary E. Lease lost her father, uncle, and two brothers to the Civil War. She also lost two of her children while living as a farmer in Kansas and Texas before a bank foreclosed on her property. Given her experience, Lease quickly fell in with the Farmers' Alliance, a group of almost a million farmers that collectively demanded an end to the "tyranny of monopoly" over land they felt was held by bankers and railroad owners. By 1892, Lease helped transition the Farmers' Alliance into the People's Party, which proved to be the most successful Third Party in U.S. history.

The success of the People's Party had a great amount to do with William Jennings Bryan. A lawyer and orator by trade, Bryan was elected into Congress at 30 years old, gaining the nickname "Boy Bryan" in the process. More than any other figure (and much to Lease's dismay), Bryan was able to merge much of the platform of the People's Party into the Democratic Party platform.

Born in 1855 in Terre Haute, Indiana to French immigrants, Eugene V. Debs started working for railroad companies at the age of 14, and for decades of his life became a staunch defender of railroad companies. Debs had a change of heart beginning in 1886 during a railroad strike against the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, and soon began organizing the American Railroad Union (ARU). In 1894, after the Pullman Company that made train cars refused to negotiate with the ARU, Debs and others called for a national boycott of the company—only to be arrested and imprisoned by the federal government under President Grover Cleveland on conspiracy charges. Experiencing such repression further radicalized Debs, and upon being released from prison he established the Social Democratic Party, and later the Socialist Party of America, and ran for president multiple times through the party.

While the Populist Party and Socialist Party shared a similar outlook on the causes of the economic strife plaguing the country, they offered different solutions. For the Populists, the issue wasn't Capitalism itself, but monopolism caused by governmental corruption. The solution was to develop a Capitalist system that provided equal support to working people and small time farmers through a variety of laws and policies. For the populists, one way to achieve this was by moving towards a "bimetallist" economic system that tied the US dollar to a standard other than just gold, which, they believed, would increase the flow of money.

Debs and the socialists, on the other hand, were more inclined to the opinion that Capitalism naturally led to monopolism, and there were little to no legal interventions that could prevent

that transition. Thus, they advocated for a slow transformation of the entire economic system in the U.S. from one led by business owners to one led by an organized group of workers.

As historian Jill Lepore writes, “Populism entered American politics at the end of the nineteenth century, and it never left.” Even though Lease never held public office, and both Bryan and Debs failed to win the presidency, the issues Populists and Socialists articulated at the turn of the century drew a rhetorical line between the working class and the wealthy. That line continues to be a foundational inspiration for politicians, journalists, and – as “The Rich Men North of Richmond” clearly shows – artists and musicians.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- That the Populist and Socialist parties arose from a shared feeling of alienation and disenfranchisement among working class Americans in the late 1800s
- The historic role Mary E. Lease, William Jennings Bryan, and Eugene V. Debs played in the Populist and Socialist movements
- While both parties critiqued similar issues, they approached solutions in a different way
- While both parties failed electorally for the most part, they succeeded in transforming popular consciousness in the United States, ushering in the Progressive Era
- Many of the issues brought up by the Socialist and Populist parties continue to be present today, and are often articulated by musicians

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to detail the critiques and platform of the Populist and Socialist movements in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, and identify how those critiques continue to the present by analyzing charts, examining political cartoons, and reciting political speeches.

ACTIVITIES

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Small note cards (2 per student group)

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Watch the YouTube video, “Oliver Anthony - Rich Men North of Richmond”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqSA-SY5Hro> (*Warning to teachers: the lyrics contain some minor*

explicit language. We suggest watching it before class to ensure it is appropriate for students. If it is found inappropriate, proceed to step two, which features amended lyrics.) Then ask students:

- Have you heard this song before? If so, where?
 - What do you think this song is about? What are your first impressions?
 - What do you think this song is critiquing?
2. Inform students that the song went viral in 2023, propelling Anthony’s career as a musician. Explain that students will be analyzing some of the lyrics to try to uncover the meaning of the song. Display **Image 1, “Rich Men North of Richmond” Amended Lyric Excerpts**. Read the lyrics silently or as a class, then ask students:
- How would you say Anthony describes himself in this song? How do you know?
 - Who might “The rich men north of Richmond” be? (*If necessary, have students navigate to this map of Virginia: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3880.ct008923/>, and ask students to locate Richmond and the biggest city directly north of it.*)
 - What kind of people might Anthony be referring to in the line “People like me and people like you”? Are they in contrast to “The rich men north of Richmond”? How so?
3. Ask students to form groups, and give them a few minutes to collectively craft a single sentence that illustrates the message of the song (*if it helps, ask students to respond to the prompt: what is the song telling you, as a listener?*) Distribute a note card to each group and ask them to write the sentence on the card, followed by the number “1.” Then collect each group’s cards.
4. Ask students:
- In the chorus, Anthony states he is “livin’ in the new world.” Do you think the problems Anthony lists in the song are new problems, or have they existed for a long time?

PROCEDURE

1. Inform students that in class they will be examining the rise of the Populist and Socialist parties in the United States in the late 1800s in order to determine if the issues Anthony discusses in the song are indeed from a “new world.” Remind student groups to hold onto their 1-sentence description, as they will be revisiting it at the end of the lesson.
2. Display **Image 2, Chart 1 from the U.S. Census**. (Alternatively, teachers can give students a copy of the chart in **Handout - Two Charts from the U.S. Census**). After giving students time to examine the chart, ask:
 - What is being presented on this chart? (*The estimated national*

wealth based upon “official valuation of houses, lands, and slaves.)

- What is the timeframe for this chart? (1825-1880)
 - What happened to the U.S. national wealth between 1825-1880? (*It grew by 40,027 million dollars, a 1223% increase.*)
3. Display **Image 3, Chart 2 from the U.S. Census**, or direct student’s attention to the second chart in the handout. After giving students time to examine the chart, ask:
- What is being presented on this chart? (*The percentage of people employed in agricultural and non agricultural jobs.*)
 - What is the timeframe for this chart? (1820-1940.)
 - Ask students to find the “Percent of total occupied” section of the chart. How have occupations in the U.S. changed between 1820 and 1900? Have agricultural occupations increased or decreased, as a percentage of the population? (*Agricultural jobs grew by around 8 million, an approximate 400% increase; non-agricultural jobs grew by 17 million, an approximate 2000% percent increase.*)
 - Why might agricultural jobs have slowed in the 1800s? What do you think they were replaced by?
 - Based on the information presented in both charts, how can you summarize economic developments in the United States in the 1800s? What type of people might be the “winners” of these economic
- changes, and who might be the “losers”?
4. Inform students that the economic changes in the late 1800s affected a lot of Americans. The Populist (also called the “People’s Party”) and the Socialist parties arose at this time because both parties felt neither the Republicans nor Democrats had any intention in helping Americans struggling in the new economy.
 5. Divide students in groups, and distribute to each student **Handout - Political Cartoons from Socialist and Populist Newspapers**. Ask groups to choose 1 cartoon that they find interesting and analyze it using the Library of **Congress Teacher’s Guide for Analyzing Political Cartoons**. (*Note to Teacher: It may be helpful to display or print out a copy of the Library of Congress Guide for student groups. Teachers may also assign groups particular cartoons if they wish.*) Ask students to make notes of their analysis on a scratch piece of paper.
 6. Have each student group share their summaries of the discussion they had about the cartoon with the class. Then ask students:
 - Based on the cartoons you analyzed, what did the Populists and Socialists feel were some of the major issues facing the United States at this time?
 - If you had to pick, what group(s) of people did the Populists and Socialists generally feel were causing these issues? Who were the victims of these issues?
 7. Explain to students that while both parties shared similar critiques of the American economy, they had different solutions. To discover these solutions, the class will be reading excerpts of speeches given by

populists Mary Elizabeth Lease and William Jennings Bryant, and socialist Eugene V. Debs.

8. Inform students that speeches are meant to be heard, not read. Therefore, ask for volunteers or assign one or more “orators” to read the speech to the class, and encourage the orators to make the speech as energetic and compelling as possible. Give **Handout - Excerpts of Speeches from Mary Elizabeth Lease, William Jennings Bryan and Eugene V. Debs**, to the selected orators. After hearing each speech, ask students:

- How did you feel after this speech? Angry? Empowered? Bored? How might you have felt if you were a farmer or a worker living in this period?

- Do you have any feelings towards the speaker themselves, based on their words? Are you inclined to like them or dislike them? Why? How does the speaker relate to the audience?

9. After all three speeches have been recited, ask students:

- Often, speeches are effective if they identify and rally the audience behind a single adversary. Do you feel these speeches do that? Who is the adversary?
- How might these speeches have galvanized the audience members into voting?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Organize students into groups. Distribute new note cards to each group and instruct students to craft a single sentence that summarizes the message the Populist and Socialist parties had for the American people in the turn of the century. This time, ask groups to write a number “2” after the sentence. Gather all the notecards.
2. Shuffle all the notecards, and inform the class that they will now be deciding as a class whether the sentence on the card refers to Oliver Anthony’s song or the Populist and Socialist parties. Read through each card and ask the class to vote silently (so that the authors of the cards can’t give away the correct answer). Keep an informal tally: after each card is read give the students the correct answer.
3. Display **Image 4, Summary Activity Writing Prompt**. Ask students to write a short summary in response to the prompt.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Go to an online newspaper and search for the words “Populism” and “Socialism.” Skim through any article in the past year that mentions those words. Then cite some of the articles you found and write whether you feel the way the term is used in the newspaper article is similar to how it was used in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
2. Learn more about how Political Parties are formed and operate in American History in the lesson “Agents of Influence: The Development of Political Parties”: (<https://resources.newamericanhistory.org/agents-of-influence>) from [newamericanhistory.org](https://resources.newamericanhistory.org)

STANDARDS

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

D2.His.17.9-12. Critique the central arguments in secondary works of history on related topics in multiple media in terms of their historical accuracy.

CALIFORNIA HISTORY—SOCIAL SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS

11.2 Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, large scale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.

8. Examine the effect of political programs and activities of Populists.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

US2.26 Evaluate the impact of progressive and populist movements on economic, social and political inequality in America.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

Topic 6. Rebuilding the United States: industry and immigration [USI.T6]

2. Make connections among the important consequences of the Industrial Revolution (e.g., economic growth and the rise of big business; environmental impact of industries; the expansion of cities; the emergence of labor unions such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor under Samuel Gompers; workers' distrust of monopolies; the rise of the Populist Party under the leadership of William Jennings Bryan or the rise of the Socialist Party under Eugene Debs).

CONNECTICUT SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES FRAMEWORK

US-2. Immigration, Industrialization, and Progressivism

US.Civ.12.a. Analyze how people in the Progressive Era used and challenged laws to advance social, political, economic, and environmental reforms (e.g., Populist Party, B'nai B'rith, National Woman Suffrage Movement, Sierra Club, Niagara Movement, Socialist Party of America).

CONNECTICUT SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES FRAMEWORK

Era 5. The Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900)

6.1.12.HistoryCC.5.a: Evaluate how events led to the creation of labor and agricultural organizations and determine the impact of those organizations on workers' rights, the economy, and politics across time periods.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Informational Text Standards for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.9 Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.6 Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.8 Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.9 Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including *The Declaration of Independence*, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of



formal and informal tasks.

LEARNING FOR JUSTICE SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

JU.9-12.12 I can recognize, describe and distinguish unfairness and injustice at different levels of society.

JU.9-12.15 I can identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.



RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Two Charts from the U.S. Census
- Handout - Political Cartoons from Socialist and Populist Newspapers
- Handout – Excerpts of Speeches from Mary E. Lease, William Jennings Bryan and Eugene V. Debs