To Build a Progressive Populism

Look to Farm Country

By Stena Chrisman

With their sights now firmly trained on 2018, Democratic strategists and liberal pundits have a opportunity to rethink populism and redefine it to better include farmers and rural communities.

Many Democrats still can’t figure out how to approach white rural residents, who are often cast as irredeemable hillbillies responsible for the election of Donald Trump. While whiteness was the clearest predictor of a vote for Trump, it is rural and working-class whites who have been held responsible, as no one is suggesting giving up on well-off white suburban voters.

Scapegoating leaves us at a standstill. It also signinors a rich history: In the 1980s, when rural life was rapidly becoming as bleak as it is today, a perfect storm of politics and economics hit middle American, in the form of the farm crisis. In response, white farmers gathered around kitchen tables and in church basements to sort out the devastation. They figured out how to help each other and researched the real roots of the crisis: farm policy that favored big business. Iowa Farmer Denise O’Brien was still learning to farm, but found herself quickly drawn in. “I attended so many meetings and felt overwhelmed with the gravity of it all,” she wrote in an unpublished essay about that time. “People were losing their farms. I didn’t totally grasp the why and hows, but I did know there was injustice. [My neighbors] were my teachers.”

The Farm Movement, as it came to be known, eventually made national headlines, partnering with celebrities like Willie Nelson — whose Farm Aid concerts brought awareness and financial support — as well as politicians like Jesse Jackson, but its activists leaders were home grown. Groups like Progressive Prairie Alliance, Prairie Fire Rural Action, and the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition set up food pantries and held “Know your Rights” forums. Farmers helped fiercely proud neighbors apply for govern ment benefits and translated people’s experiences into legislative proposals. Farmer wives like Lou Anne King and Linda Hessman taught themselves agricultural credit law to understand what was happening on their own farms and found themselves running ad hoc legal and crisis hotlines from their dining rooms.

Meanwhile, the farm movement reinforced Jackson’s message in farmers’ lives: The direct services addressed immediate needs, while tractorcades and other creative protests, law suits, and nationally televised Farm Aid Concerts built national sympathy for the farmer’s plight. The activism focused on federal policy meant that a farm bill returning economic power to family farmer very nearly passed in Congress in 1987, and President Reagan, famously hostile to farmers most of the decade, signed legislation later that year that stemmed foreclosures and kept more families on their farms.

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Continued on pg. 19

Roger Allison
Executive Director
Missouri Rural Crisis Center
Founded on 1985
State Wide organization of 5,600 farm and rural families with 15 chapter across the state

With fewer farmers in immediate crisis — partly because there are fewer farms overall — the farm movement has quieted in the decades since then. But it hasn’t died. Roger Allison founded Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC) in 1985 and still runs it with his wife Rhonda Perry. Today MRCC gives a powerful voice to its 5,600 member families, fighting for independent farm families, a locally based economy, and grassroots democracy in deep-rural Missouri. One of the organizing principles, as Allison puts it, is that “Farmers are not going to win economic and social justice in isolation from the rest of society.” So, the members see it as their duty, to “empower them to strengthen understanding among diverse groups of people.”

Allison and Perry aren’t the only ones. There is a long history of grassroots, multi-issue, equity-based rural organizing in Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota, west to Colorado, Montana, and Oregon, and down to Kentucky and North Carolina, just for starters. These groups have simply been outgunned in recent decades as “The Right” has focused on building a rural base while “The Left” has concentrated in cities.

Populism claimed by both Left and Right in the 150 years since its coin ing, has leaned more decisively Right in the last decade, espoused not only by the Tea Party and Donald Trump, but by leaders around the world such as Marine LePén and Narendra Modi. But in rural white America, where the idea that the idea began, it is ripe for reclaiming. The way to support a resurgence of progressive populism in the heartland isn’t to parochute in as saviors: It is still, as a farm movement of the 1980s demonstrates, to take seriously the very real concerns there — poverty, drug epidemics, suicide — and invest in what’s already happening on the ground.

In rural Missouri, Roger Allison says he’s been more successful than ever in the last year: “fighting back, just like we always have.” Fighting back, ultimately means addressing members’ needs and getting them involved in the solution, from opposing factory farms and organizing rural health care to bringing in rural and urban youth together at farm camp.

But they can’t do it alone. “We need help out here,” Allison sighs. “Nobody’s ringing our doorbell to say ‘Hey, we want to put money into rural organizing.’” It’s about time more people did.

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