Agrarian Revolt

- Changes in rhythms of traditional rural life
  - Farmers not isolated people living in island communities
    - they were tied directly into an agricultural market economy
    - they enjoyed extensive networks of kinship and friendship
  - Change brought about by:
    - spread of railroads
    - merchants began to set up shops in the towns and crossroad communities, providing points of contact between farmers and the larger markets
    - the railroad and the country store brought machines and chemical fertilizers which made farming more productive (and at same time more dependent on credit)
    - In the west and south, farmers of two minds about the networks of transportation and trade that linked them to the outside world
      - farmers knew railroads and markets were as essential to their way of life as the land itself--and saw that these agents of modernity held great promise
      - at same time, farmers increasingly viewed railroads and markets as engines of oppression
  - Farmers' vision of a well-ordered society dated back to a body of thought stemming from the founding fathers
    - based on simple idea that the producer deserves the fruits of his or her work
    - the enemies of this ideology were the "special privileges" or monopolies
      - banks held monopolies over credit
      - land syndicates monopolized acreage
      - railroads who monopolized transportation

- Origins of the Farmers Alliances
  - During the 1880s and early 1890s, western and southern farmers felt the federal government was unresponsive to their problems
    - falling agricultural prices
    - tight money supply, high interest rates and debt
    - overcharging by farm-implement dealers, grain-elevator operators, and railroads
  - Political efforts
    - At first, farmers had turned to the Grange and to the Greenback party for political assistance, but those efforts produced little
    - In the mid-1880s, farmers began to join Farmers' Alliances
      - Southern
      - National Colored
      - Northwestern
      - National Farmers' Alliance (umbrella organization)
    - Alliances originally formed as cooperatives, seeking to give more buying and selling power to farmers through collective effort
    - By 1890, the different Alliances began to back candidates for election--helping elect 4 governors and gaining control of 11 state legislatures, 3 senators and 50 congressmen
  - Dissatisfaction with traditional parties lead alliance members to form the People's Party (Populists) in 1892
    - Meet in Omaha in 1892 and draft platform which calls for:
      - tariff reduction
      - graduated income tax
      - public ownership of the railroads and telegraphs
      - free silver
      - prohibition of land ownership by aliens
    - Populists got over 1 million votes (8.5% of total), elected five senators, ten congressmen, and 3 governors
    - Election of 1892 showed weaknesses
      - no support from New England, urban parts of the East, and the Midwest
      - no support from organized labor
• Death by compromise—the election of 1896
  o Populist movement dead by 1896
    ▪ Grover Cleveland elected again in 1892
      ▪ Nation goes into severe depression in 1893, lasts until 1897—worst ever up to that time
      ▪ Unemployment in industrial sector as high as 25%
      ▪ Farm prices drop 1/5, finishing off many farmers
      ▪ In 1894, Jacob Coxey leads an “army” of unemployed demanding public-work efforts to create jobs—he’s arrested and demonstration broken
    ▪ Middle and upper class frightened by unrest
    ▪ Appeal of Populist Party should be high
  o Election of 1896
    ▪ Free silver becomes big symbolic issue—symbolizing the deep split between economic classes
      ▪ Creditors fear abandonment of gold standard will lead to runaway inflation and ruin
      ▪ Debt-ridden farmers see silver as way to ease credit problems, raise farm prices, and return prosperity
    ▪ Democratic National convention
      ▪ Western and southern delegates gain control
      ▪ Write platform calling for free silver and lower tariffs
      ▪ Nominate William Jennings Bryan
        ▪ 36 year old lawyer from Nebraska who had served 2 terms in Congress
        ▪ Great orator—"Cross of Gold" speech
          ▪ "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold"
          ▪ "If you burned down all the cities, fields would grow in their places. But if you destroyed all the fields, cities would wither and die."
    ▪ Populists aren’t satisfied with the Democratic platform (too much emphasis on silver)
      ▪ But they fear running a candidate against Bryan would split the farm vote
      ▪ They endorse Bryan as the Populist candidate, although they choose a different V.P.
    ▪ Republicans nominate Senator William McKinley of Ohio as candidate
      ▪ McKinley promises to raise protective tariff to protect industry
      ▪ Maintain the gold standard
      ▪ His campaign receives huge contributions from businessmen who fear Bryan
      ▪ Mark Hanna, campaign manager, creates a masterful political advertising strategy that holds McKinley as a good, God-fearing man and Bryan as a wild-eyed radical (development of cult of personality in politics)
    ▪ McKinley beats Bryan by 600,000 votes
      ▪ Bryan loses in the Northeast and the big cities of the Midwest
      ▪ Does not appeal to factory workers, urban middle class, or immigrants

→ Populist Party is dead following the election