

## United We Stand? Tom Watson on Interracial Southern Populism

*Just as the question of race divided the Southern Populist movement, so has it divided historians. Some scholars point to the uniquely interracial qualities of the Populist movement, while others emphasize the ways that racial divisions limited the success of southern agrarian radicals. Part of the difficulty in resolving the dispute is the complexity and ambiguity of race relations in Southern Populism. In his famous essay on "The Negro Question in the South," published in 1892, Tom Watson, a Southern Populist who was elected to the U.S. Congress from Georgia in 1890, made one of the strongest cases for an alliance of black and white farmers. Yet Watson was calling for a strategic political alliance, not a fully integrated society, and his commitment to interracialism did not survive the defeat of the Populist movement. After the turn of the century, Watson led efforts to disfranchise African Americans, publishing demagogic attacks on them as well as on Catholics and Jews.*

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Why should the colored man always be taught that the white man of his neighborhood hates him, while a Northern man, who taxes every rag on his back, loves him? Why should not my tenant come to regard me as his friend rather than the manufacturer who plunders us both? Why should we perpetuate a policy which drives the black man into the arms of the Northern politician?

Why should we always allow Northern and Eastern Democrats to enslave us forever by threats of the Force Bill?

Let us draw the supposed teeth of this fabled dragon by founding our new policy upon justice—upon the simple but profound truth that, if the voice of passion can be hushed, the self interest of both races will drive them to act in concert. There never was a day during the last twenty years when the South could not have flung the money power into the dust by patiently teaching the Negro that we could not be wretched under any system which would not afflict him likewise; that we could not prosper under any law which would not also bring its blessings to him.

To the emasculated individual who cries "Negro supremacy!" there is little to be said. His cowardice shows him to be a degeneration from the race which has never yet feared any other race. Existing under such conditions as they now do in this country, there is no earthly chance for Negro domination, unless we are ready to admit that the colored man is our superior in will power, courage, and intellect.

Not being prepared to make any such admission in favor of any race the sun ever shone on, I have no words which can portray my contempt for the white men, Anglo-Saxons, who can knock their knees together, and through their chattering teeth and pale lips admit that they are afraid the Negroes will "dominate us."

The question of social equality does not enter into the calculation at all. That is a thing each citizen decides for himself. No statute ever yet drew the latch of the humblest home—or ever will. Each citizen regulates his own visiting list—and always will.

The conclusion, then, seems to me to be this: the crushing burdens which now oppress both races in the South will cause each to make an effort to cast them off. They will see a similarity of cause and a similarity of remedy. They will recognize that each should help the other in the work of repealing bad

laws and enacting good ones. They will become political allies, and neither can injure the other without weakening both. It will be to the interest of both that each should have justice. And on these broad lines of mutual interest, mutual forbearance, and mutual support the present will be made the stepping-stone to future peace and prosperity.

Source: Thomas E. Watson, "The Negro Question in the South," *The Arena*, VI(October 1892): 540–550. Reprinted in George Brown Tindall, ed., *A Populist Reader: Selections from the Works of American Populist Leaders* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 118–128.