

Thomas W. Woodrow's Appeals for Socialism Based on Religion and Economics  
Joshua Overcash

During the early 1900s, Oklahoma contained one of the largest socialist parties in the United States. In his magazine, *Woodrow's Monthly*, Thomas W. Woodrow, a socialist Christian pastor in Hobart, Oklahoma, created a wide variety of appeals for socialism. Woodrow's socialist philosophy directly reflected his economic and religious context in rural Oklahoma in the early 1900s. Examining the religious and economic situation of Oklahoma during this time period reveals why Woodrow made the appeals he did and why his appeals would have been likely to produce his intended effect.

To understand the appeals that Woodrow chose to make, it is crucial to understand his context in rural Oklahoma. The economy of Oklahoma played an important role in shaping Thomas Woodrow. In the book, *The Story of Oklahoma*, Muriel H. Wright reveals that agriculture was the largest industry in Oklahoma during the early 1900s.<sup>1</sup> This industry was an enormous part of the Oklahoman economy and Wright went so far as to say that "the basis of wealth in Oklahoma depends on agricultural and mineral products."<sup>2</sup> In 1900, agriculture alone employed 70 percent of the labor force.<sup>3</sup> However, this industry typically resulted in the laborers, the majority, remaining poor while only a few became wealthy. This was due in large part to the increasing rate of tenancy and the crop lien.<sup>4</sup> In 1910, the tenancy rate in Oklahoma was over 55 percent.<sup>5</sup> In tenancy, farmers did not own the land that they worked and were required to give a portion of their product to the land owner. With crop prices already being low, it was practically

---

<sup>1</sup> Muriel E. Wright, *The Story of Oklahoma* (Oklahoma: Webb Publishing Company, 1929), 309.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Wright, *The Story of Oklahoma*, 309.

<sup>3</sup> Larkin Warner, "Oklahoma Economy," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, [www.okhistory.org](http://www.okhistory.org) (accessed October 27, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 11.

impossible for farmers to make a profit in this system, and many were driven into debt. This made farmers susceptible to the crop lien. Because farmers were unable to make profits, they often did not have money to pay for the supplies needed for the next year. The crop lien allowed farmers to obtain supplies on credit from merchants; however, because of high interest rates and the inability of farmers to pay it off until months later, it resulted in very high supply prices. Jim Bissett perfectly described the system in which farmers were taken advantage of by saying, “Farmers...faced a strategic disadvantage at both ends of the selling relationship. At the same time that they received artificially low prices for their products, they paid inflated prices for the commodities they needed to survive.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason, it was impossible for farmers to get ahead, and they were stuck in a system that drove them into debt. Because farming was such a huge portion of the Oklahoma economy, Oklahoma as a whole was in terrible economic condition. Oscar Ameringer, a social activist said that “The Oklahoma farmers’ standard of living was so far below that of the sweatshop workers of the New York east side that comparison could not be thought of.”<sup>7</sup>

Woodrow’s religious context also played an important role in his appeals. Christianity has historically been the dominant religion in the United States. Because of this, many people would have been familiar with Christian ideas and language even if they themselves were not Christians. This was likely the case in Oklahoma. In 1952, in the earliest Religion Census, there were over 4000 Christian congregations in Oklahoma.<sup>8</sup> Over 40 percent of the population of Oklahoma were members of religious organizations.<sup>9</sup> Jim Bissett writes that Oklahoma was

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Bisset, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Bisset, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Religion Census 1952 to 2010,” U.S. Religion Census, <http://www.usreligioncensus.org/compare.php> (accessed November 2, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Religion Census 1952 to 2010.”

“steeped in the traditions of fundamentalist Christianity.”<sup>10</sup> Because of this, Christianity had a significant influence in Oklahoma during the early 1900s.

Once one understands the religious and economic context of Oklahoma, Woodrow’s appeals are much clearer and it is easier to see why he would have chosen them. One of Woodrow’s main methods of persuasion is his appeal to the authority of God and this can be found all throughout his publications. One of the clearest ways he does this is through his use of Scripture. Christianity claims that Scripture is God’s word, so by using it to support socialism, it appears that God supports socialism. Woodrow quotes Scripture in many places, but one of the best examples of it is in his article “Visions of the Future.”<sup>11</sup> In this section, he argues that socialism will naturally replace capitalism and uses multiple stories from the Bible as well as direct quotes from Micah 3:9-12 and 4:1-5 to support his claims.<sup>12</sup> In other places he essentially comes straight out and says that he is not capable of creating socialism and that it has to be a higher power.<sup>13</sup> In one of his editorials he states, “My poor, weak, and limited brain is not capable of devising a program of life and destiny better, more glorious, and more satisfactory to the mind than is provided.”<sup>14</sup> In this quote he is saying that no human mind could have come up with something as good as socialism, so that it must be God.<sup>15</sup> Because of the religious context of his audience, this appeal is likely to persuade many. Bissett recognized this when he argued that Christianity gave socialism a “legitimacy generally denied to radical political organizations.”<sup>16</sup> Because many in Oklahoma were Christians, Woodrow’s appeal to a higher authority, God, would have been very persuasive.

---

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 91.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, “Visions of the Future,” *Woodrow’s Monthly*, August 1914, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Woodrow, “Visions of the Future,” 12.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, “Mind The Measure of Truth,” *Woodrow’s Monthly*, August 1914, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Woodrow, “Mind The Measure of Truth,” 5.

<sup>15</sup> Woodrow, “Mind The Measure of Truth,” 5.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 89-90.

Another way Woodrow tries to accomplish his goal is through his appeal to familiarity. By referencing Scripture and Christianity, Woodrow is likely to persuade his audience because many already accept them as true or are at least familiar with them. In his book, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, Bissett recognized this and even said that Christianity provided the “perfect vehicle for spreading the [socialist] political message.”<sup>17</sup> By using Scripture and stories from the Bible, Woodrow would have an easier time convincing his audience because it is easier to persuade one of something that they already believe or recognize. Bissett agrees with this when he says that “because of its widespread acceptance in the Oklahoma countryside, evangelical Protestantism provided a cultural language that was readily accessible and universally understood by prospective socialists.”<sup>18</sup> Woodrow took advantage of this familiarity and used it to persuade his audience. One way he did this was through his “Three Parodies”—three alterations of well-known Scriptures and songs, to show that capitalism is the exact opposite of Christianity.<sup>19</sup> One used the Lord’s Prayer, another Psalm 23, and the third a well-known hymn called “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood.”<sup>20</sup> By using things that his audience was already familiar with, Woodrow had an easier time communicating his socialism and was much more likely to persuade his audience.

Woodrow also appeals to morality. He attempts to depict capitalism as evil and unjust and socialism as the correction of this problem.<sup>21</sup> One of the ways he does this is by redefining his terms. Socialism is often thought of as legal theft or confiscation. Woodrow focuses on the term *confiscation*, which has a negative connotation and is often thought of as a penalty. To change the perception of socialism, he flips the tables by saying that socialism brings about

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, *Three Parodies*, (Hobart, Oklahoma).

<sup>20</sup> Woodrow, *Three Parodies*.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, “Confiscation or Restitution, Which?” *Woodrow’s Monthly*, May 1914, 7.

restitution rather than confiscation.<sup>22</sup> *Restitution* has a positive connotation and carries the idea of the undoing of an injustice. This word has the opposite effect of confiscation and portrays socialism in a positive light. He also shows that restitution is a Biblical idea and therefore must be good.<sup>23</sup> By changing these terms, he makes socialism appear to be just. To make capitalism appear evil, he shows that capitalism is the opposite of socialism which he has shown to be good. He depicts capitalism as the “expropriation of the masses by a few usurpers” and socialism as the “expropriation of a few usurpers by the masses.”<sup>24</sup> Another way Woodrow attempts to show capitalism as evil is through his “Three Parodies.” In the “Farmer’s Union Hymn,” he changes the lyrics and writes them as if from the perspective of a capitalist.<sup>25</sup> The first verse of Woodrow’s parody says, “There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from poor labor’s veins, and farmers plunged beneath that flood, lose all their labor gains.”<sup>26</sup> Here, Woodrow is clearly referencing the tenancy and crop lien that farmers faced and how that injustice rose out of the capitalist system.<sup>27</sup> Woodrow attempts to show capitalism as morally wrong and socialism as a solution to the problem. In doing so, he would have been likely to persuade his largely Christian audience.

Woodrow also uses the experiences of his audience to give his claims credibility. By referencing things that they have experienced for themselves and agree with, he is likely to gather more support. His audience has seen the “evils” of capitalism and is familiar with the terrible conditions of Oklahoma. Because of their horrible economic situation, they will be more likely to agree with him as they need change. Each edition of his publication *Woodrow’s*

---

<sup>22</sup> Woodrow, “Confiscation or Restitution, Which?” 7.

<sup>23</sup> Woodrow, “Confiscation or Restitution, Which?” 7.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Woodrow, “Confiscation or Restitution, Which?” 7.

<sup>25</sup> Woodrow, *Three Parodies*.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Woodrow, *Three Parodies*.

<sup>27</sup> Woodrow, *Three Parodies*.

*Monthly* contains the same opening declaration called the Pronunciamento.<sup>28</sup> Section 1 says that socialism leads to economic mutuality and equality.<sup>29</sup> This would have been very appealing because of the experience of his audience. Because the economic situation led to a few being wealthy but most of the laborers being left in abject poverty, the idea of economic equality would have been very attractive. In Section 3 of the Pronunciamento, Woodrow says socialism and primitive Christianity are the only ways to remedy the evils that they are experiencing.<sup>30</sup> Woodrow recognizes the experiences of his audience and bases his appeals on them. In addition to the economic experience, he also uses their remembrance of the past. He uses this to disarm attacks made by the church on socialism.<sup>31</sup> Woodrow says, “I challenge any priest or preacher in the world to point to a single idea in politics, science, or industry that was championed by any of the great religious organizations until after the new idea had fought its way in triumph through the opposition and criticism of fossilized conservatism.”<sup>32</sup> Woodrow is saying that just because the church opposes socialism does not mean it is wrong.<sup>33</sup> After all, the church has always been slow to accept change, but eventually will. By referring to the memories and past experiences of his audience and using them to support his claims, Woodrow is more likely to persuade them.

Another way Woodrow is likely to persuade his audience is by including letters of support from fellow reformers. In each publication, Woodrow includes many letters he has received that encourage and support him for his views.<sup>34</sup> During the early 1900s, socialism was not the dominant view point in the United States. The word socialism had a negative connotation in the minds of many Americans. However, Woodrow creates a strong appeal by making it seem

---

<sup>28</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, “Pronunciamento,” *Woodrow’s Monthly*, May 1914, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Woodrow, “Pronunciamento,” 4.

<sup>30</sup> Woodrow, “Pronunciamento,” 4.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, “Comments and Criticisms,” *Woodrow’s Monthly*, 1914, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Woodrow, “Comments and Criticisms,” 7.

<sup>33</sup> Woodrow, “Comments and Criticisms,” 7.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, “Letters,” *Woodrow’s Monthly*, May 1914, 23-26.

that being a socialist is not a negative thing and that a large number support it.<sup>35</sup> It is much easier to support something when there are many others in agreement. By including the letters, Woodrow makes it easier for others to join the party as there are already so many others in support of it. Woodrow also shows that support for socialism is growing by highlighting the growth of the Socialist Party. A letter from Phil Callery, the private secretary of the mayor of Schenectady, New York, recounts the increased support for socialism.<sup>36</sup> By showing that many support socialism, it makes it easier for others to join the party.

Woodrow creates further appeal for socialism by saying it is will come about naturally, with or without a majority.<sup>37</sup> In order to do this, he compares socialism to cooperation and capitalism to competition and says that “as cooperation grows competition dies.”<sup>38</sup> He then goes on to argue that this will happen naturally as “cooperation conserves while competition dissipates itself.”<sup>39</sup> He claims that with only a few socialists, socialism will eventually triumph because it does not need a majority to pass legislation because it is “so palpably and evidently true.”<sup>40</sup> He argues that this change from capitalism to socialism can happen easily and without conflict because just by a few practicing cooperation, competition decreases.<sup>41</sup> As more and more practice cooperation, those private owners relying on competition will not be able to succeed. As the benefits of cooperation are seen, more will join leading to the end of capitalism because the principles of socialism will start to be reflected in law.<sup>42</sup> Through this argument, Wilson creates a strong appeal for socialism by showing it as natural.

---

<sup>35</sup> Woodrow, “Letters,” 23-26.

<sup>36</sup> Woodrow, “Letters,” 23-26.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas W. Woodrow, “The Dispensation of Socialism,” *Woodrow’s Monthly*, May 1914, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Woodrow, “The Dispensation of Socialism,” 14.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Woodrow, “The Dispensation of Socialism,” 14.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Woodrow, “The Dispensation of Socialism,” 14.

<sup>41</sup> Woodrow, “The Dispensation of Socialism,” 14.

<sup>42</sup> Woodrow, “The Dispensation of Socialism,” 14.

In his magazine, *Woodrow's Monthly*, Woodrow creates a wide variety of appeals for socialism. Woodrow bases his appeals off of the religious and economic context of rural Oklahoma in the early 1900s. Because of the terrible economic conditions in Oklahoma, many people would be desperate for change and willing to abandon the current system for hope of improving their current situation. Wilson uses this opportunity created by the economic situation to promote socialism using many appeals based on religion because of the region's familiarity with the ideas and language of Christianity.