Indian Landlords and Socialist Votes

Imperial Indigestion in Oklahoma

SARAH T. PHILLIPS

ABSTRACT *In the second decade of the twentieth century, Oklahoma hosted the largest state Socialist Party in the United States. The poor white farmers who formed its base hoped that their representatives would release them from local landlords, banks, and creditors. But these tenants and sharecroppers vented their grievances from inside a shattered landscape of recent and ongoing Indigenous dispossession. They could not entomb Native people entirely inside the past, because they confronted a great deal of Indian landownership. Oklahoma Socialists observed how politicians, lawyers, and businessmen grew fat on Indian resources and the deliberate pursuit of injury, fraud, and deception. But they evaded a direct attack on American colonial expansion and instead condemned its capitalist character. Capitalists, they argued, had first conquered the Indians, and now they had created an oppressed agricultural working class. In Oklahoma, radical economic dissent intersected with US imperial policy. Modern leftist politics helped justify and conceal the outcomes of conquest.*

KEYWORDS *Oklahoma, socialism, politics, Native Americans, imperialism*

In 1912, the Dallas agricultural weekly *Farm and Ranch* sent an associate editor to Oklahoma to report back on a curious situation. Admitted as a state only five years earlier, Oklahoma had very recently been Indian Territory, the last region in the continental United States where Native nations exercised both political and territorial sovereignty. Beginning in 1889, the federal government opened up western Oklahoma to white homesteading claims via successive land runs and lotteries, but eastern Oklahoma—forever promised to the "Five Civilized Tribes" after the Trail of Tears—had a different history. There, between 1897 and 1907, each of the five tribes (also called the "Five Nations") lost its country. Denationalization and the implementation of allotment, or the forced process of land dispossession and privatization, resulted in a frenzy of speculation and fraud, leaving vast tracts of prime agricultural land in the hands of Indians and large land companies. To try one's luck in this final frontier, you had to lease land from the representatives of an aggressive and manipulative new commercial system. "How, then, is this

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Indian land rented?" asked *Farm and Ranch* in 1912. "Who are the renters and what is the effect?"[1]

The Texas farm paper thought its readers might be intrigued by a closer look at the proliferation of Indian landlords just across the Red River. Reporter Charles Holman traveled the region, spoke to US officials and agents, and claimed he conferred with Indians "in their own homes."[2] Indians, according to Holman, never wanted to be the landlords they had become. But they did not value work, he asserted, and they did not intend to farm much land themselves. Nor, according to the provisions governing allotment, could Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, Creek, or Cherokee "full-bloods" quickly sell off their newly privatized parcels. So Indians lived off the agricultural work of others, Holman told his readers. They leaned on white entrepreneurs to sell their eligible acreage and to rent out the remainder on their behalf.

While Holman certainly trafficked in racist stereotypes, he also made sure to position Indians as victims. All allotted land except the Indian home, Holman explained, was "slipping from his possession." And the victimizing force responsible for this whole situation was not the most obvious one—American imperial policy—but the white land speculator and financial investor. "When an Indian sells any of his land, the actual farmer is not the man who gets possession," he said. "The land speculator, omnipresent and usually omniscient, is on the job and gets away with the prize. . . . The Indian gets very little for his own rentals, but the lease speculator makes a fair profit."[3] The folks not making any money at all were the white renters. Holman concluded that all this "legalized graft" had resulted in disgraceful conditions and widespread poverty. Land and people suffered. He witnessed very little agricultural prosperity, but a great deal of soil degradation, poorly maintained farms, indefensibly high rates of tenancy, and a lot of human misery.[4]

Holman's reporting accomplished in miniature something that I contend happened en masse: He pivoted away from a confrontation with empire to a confrontation with capitalism. Native people either worked in tandem with the voracious new commercial system, or they constituted the first set of victims whose history neatly foreshadowed that of the next set: oppressed white tenants. Holman, incidentally, was a burgeoning critic of modern economic conditions who sounded an early warning bell for industrial labor relations in agriculture. (In three years he would serve as chief field investigator for the federal Commission on Industrial Relations.)[5] His sojourn in Oklahoma, however, should signal to us that in this place, at this time, agrarian progressives could not analyze rural inequality and rural capitalist relations on a

simple checkerboard of greedy landowners and lowly sharecroppers; they first needed to tell a story about Indians.

Holman declined to report back on the political situation in Oklahoma, but one wonders why he missed or ignored the most remarkable development among those immiserated white tenants: the lightning-fast growth of the Socialist Party. In 1912, the Socialist presidential candidate, Eugene Debs, won the highest percentage of votes the Socialists had ever received in a national election. Debs received the most support not from an industrial state but from Oklahoma. While 6 percent of the national vote went to Debs, in Oklahoma he gathered 16 percent. Debs had parted ways with the urban Socialist leaders in the East, vowing to make common cause among industrial workers and debt-ridden farmers. He made explicit appeals to exploited and isolated Western laborers like miners and lumbermen, and he moderated and "Americanized" Socialist principles to address pressing agrarian grievances and tenant aspirations.

Eastern Oklahoma, as Holman also discovered in 1912, was a recent extension of the southern cotton system but peopled mainly with poor white farmers, more than half of whom moved every year in search of something better. In many counties the tenancy rate topped 70 percent, and in some it reached 80 percent. Infuriated by the landlord, merchant, and banker elite, and blocked from landownership, many rural whites embraced radical economic change. The poor farmers of Oklahoma built the largest state Socialist Party in the United States, both in raw numbers and in proportion to population, and maintained it for almost ten years before its suppression just before and during World War I. The Socialists threw the Democrats into a total panic as they increased their vote dramatically between 1907 and 1916. While they never attained statewide office, Socialists elected five state representatives, one state senator, and numerous town officials. In 1914 their candidate for state governor received more than 20 percent of the vote.

The Socialist Party's national leaders viewed the upstart Southwesterners as inescapably bourgeois, too beholden to the maintenance of private property, and too warped by the constituent desire for farm ownership to engage in class struggle. But the Oklahomans did not need the national party (even though they did love Gene Debs). They had their own newspapers, organizers, and voters. Nor did it matter that their understanding of socialism was theoretically inconsistent and religiously fervent. Poor rural people elected Socialists to local and state positions hoping that their representatives would release them from local landlords, banks, and creditors and gain for them some land and a measure of dignity and comfort. The state party's "Renters and Farmers

Program" proposed to enlarge the public domain; establish public operation of grain elevators, warehouses, and insurance; institute a confiscatory land tax to discourage speculation and monopoly; and provide lifetime leases of public land to farmers, with nominal rents due only to the land fund itself.

But these outraged farmers vented their grievances from inside a shattered landscape of recent and ongoing Indian dispossession. Indeed, it is this intersection of radical economic dissent and empire that I want to explore. Serious and sincere leftists recognized and remarked on the Indigenous situation, but, like Holman, they ultimately ruminated on the injustices of industrialism, not the sins of colonialism. Oklahoma Socialists looked around and observed how politicians, lawyers, and businessmen grew fat on Indian resources and the deliberate pursuit of injury, trickery, fraud, and deception. Yet the Socialists evaded a direct attack on American colonial expansion and instead condemned its capitalist character. They took issue with the fact that the frontier was supposed to have guaranteed individual freedom, not corporate freedom, and that American elites had honed their predations on Indians before moving on to farmers. Capitalists had first done in the Indians, and now they had created an oppressed agricultural working class.

Oscar Ameringer, for example, one of the most dedicated Socialist Party organizers in Oklahoma, took pity on the Indians' situation. He initially explained Indigenous dissipation in the way millions of other racist Americans did: Indians were a weak people, unequipped for the modern world. But, for Ameringer, Native history was not a lesson in colonial reckoning. It was ultimately a story about how modern capitalism devoured the agrarian promise:

> Somebody had to support poor Lo. He could not be supported by taxes levied on the United States, all of which had been taken from him. So what more natural than to let poor Lo keep his land and let the poor hillbillies work it? . . . And so we have the interesting spectacle of white, native, Protestant Americans working as land slaves, tenants, and sharecroppers of the aboriginal Indian. . . . The outstanding feature of the Homestead Act was that until the settler could prove his use and occupancy, his presence constituted his only claim to the land. . . . The tragedy of American farm life is that the Homestead Act was not made perpetual. . . . As it was, the same separation between ownership and labor came about in American agriculture that characterizes modern industry.[6]

Scholars in Indigenous history and Western history have certainly examined the conquest and privatization of Indigenous lands, both in the nation as a whole and in Indian Territory specifically.[7] Political historians have also

supplied authoritative interpretations of Oklahoma socialism (and of populism and progressivism, the more mainstream currents of reform).[8] But no one has yet attempted to consider the dissipation of Indigenous power and territory alongside the ascendant national themes of twentieth-century political history. What could we learn from this unique place, where American settler colonialism created the largest and most radical white rural mobilization in the whole country? What did Oklahoma dissenters have to say about Indians? And how did the agrarian wing of the modern American political reform tradition intersect with Indigenous dispossession and make sense of it?

Narrating American politics as racist and exclusionist is not a novel interpretation, nor is that my intervention. This is an imperial history of the political and cultural digestion of territorial conquest—how one set of modern radicals justified, naturalized, and moved on. When US history is taught as a survey course or presented in textbooks, there is usually a very sharp break between the history of white territorial settlement and Indigenous conquest, on the one hand, and the history of the modern politics of the emergent industrial order on the other. One chapter ends with the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre, and the next chapter opens with western Populists fighting railroads, low commodity prices, and the gold standard. The Populists herald a "Progressive Era"—a response to industrialism, a suite of reform ideas, and a collection of social improvements—that structure political contests and policy development for the next two decades. But Oklahoma experienced no such neat division. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries collided like two tectonic plates. I contend that antimonopolist, anticorporate, anticapitalist, and socialist ideas—the building blocks of a modern reform tradition that we mainly associate with the period following continental conquest—helped justify, explain, and conceal the outcomes of conquest. In other words, Americans digested empire, one of the country's worst features, with some of its best political constructions.

First, some general background on Oklahoma.[9] In popular mythology and older historical thinking, settlers moved across North America along a frontier line that bulged and swerved, and was often leapt over in the rush to the Pacific, but that nevertheless traced a steady chronological progression from East to West. Of course the concept of the frontier was desperately flawed, not only morally (it presumed destiny and entitlement) but also economically (industrial interests, not yeomen, first claimed Western resources). But in terms of the geographical marks of territorial acquisition, the establishment of political boundaries, and the confinement of Native people to bounded reservations, there were clear divisions of property and sovereignty.

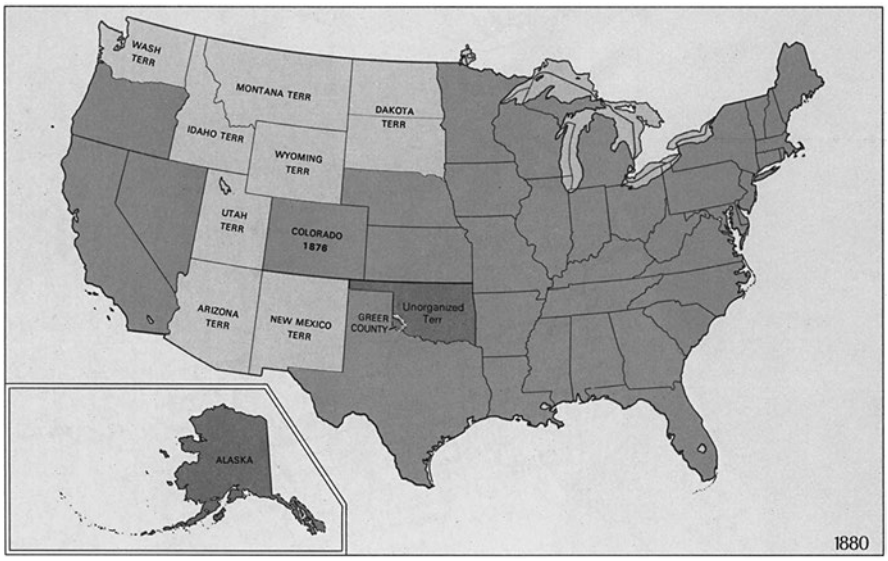


FIGURE 1. US territorial map in 1880. Adapted from Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USA_Territorial_Growth_1880.jpg).

Even though the frontier may never have been a steady, westward-moving line of white settlement, the frontier did not end in 1890 (as proposed by the famous thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893).[10] Rather, it had arranged itself as a noose, tied in the center of the country around the neck of the last remaining chunk of Indian Territory (fig. 1).

Into this remaining space, the American government had first relocated the Five Nations: the Cherokees, Creeks, Seminoles, Choctaws, and Chickasaws. These Southeastern nations had been forcibly settled there in the 1830s and 1840s with the promise that they would now occupy and govern these new lands forever. Initially, the Five Nations were granted most of what became Oklahoma, but because many of the Indian elites owned enslaved people and sided with the Confederacy during the Civil War, the US government stripped them of their Western possessions in 1866. In the western part of Indian Territory the United States then created reservations for Plains Indian groups defeated during the 1870s and 1880s. Also interspersed throughout the future state of Oklahoma were the reservations of other Indigenous nations moved from other parts of the country (fig. 2).

Officially, the federal government and the military operated under treaty orders to eject illegal white occupants (tribal sovereignty still determined a white person's legal residency), and that sometimes happened. But military forts and roads, cattle trails, and railroads cut across Indian lands (the

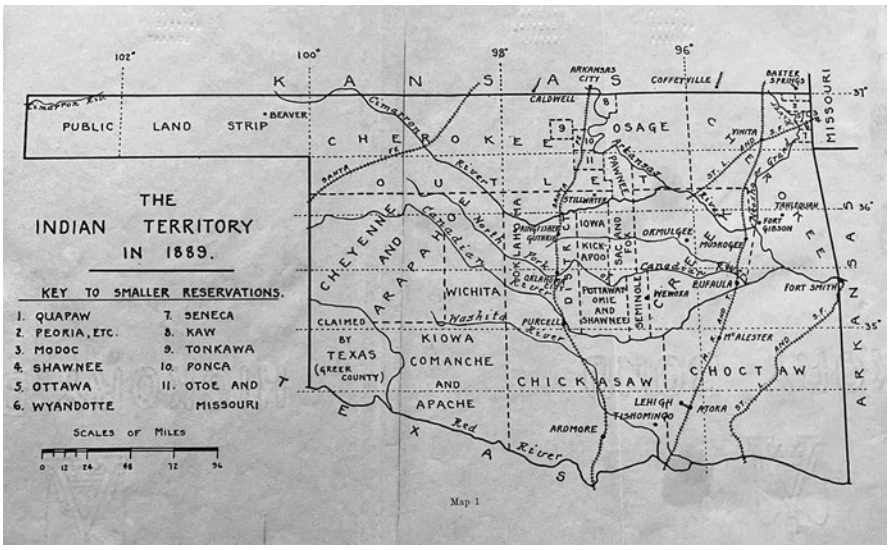


FIGURE 2. Indian Territory in 1889. From Gittinger, *Formation*. It is glued inside the front cover.

federal government compelled the railroad cessions, another consequence of the 1866 treaties with the Five Nations). These avenues of modern economic incorporation brought supply towns, an increasing white population, and an acceleration of industrial and corporate investment in the region. Seething along the borders with Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas was also a restless and violent mix of hopeful homesteaders clamoring for their piece of the final agricultural frontier (fig. 3).

In Washington, DC, the Dawes Act of 1887 initiated the dissolution of Indian Territory and launched the privatization of reservation lands across the country (fig. 4). On the belief that Indians needed to become solid yeomen farmers and upright male heads of household, and provoked by the ceaseless agitation of homesteader advocates demanding land and industrial interests wanting resources, Congress ordered that Indians accept private allotments of land, usually of around 160 acres, and that "surplus" land on reservations be opened for general survey and sale. Particularly objectionable to reformers in Washington was the fact that most Indians held land communally. As Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts explained in 1885, the Indians "have got as far as they can go, because they own their land in common. . . . There is no enterprise to make your home any better than that of your neighbor. . . . There is no selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilization. Till this people will consent to give up their lands, and divide them among their citizens, they will not make much progress."[11]

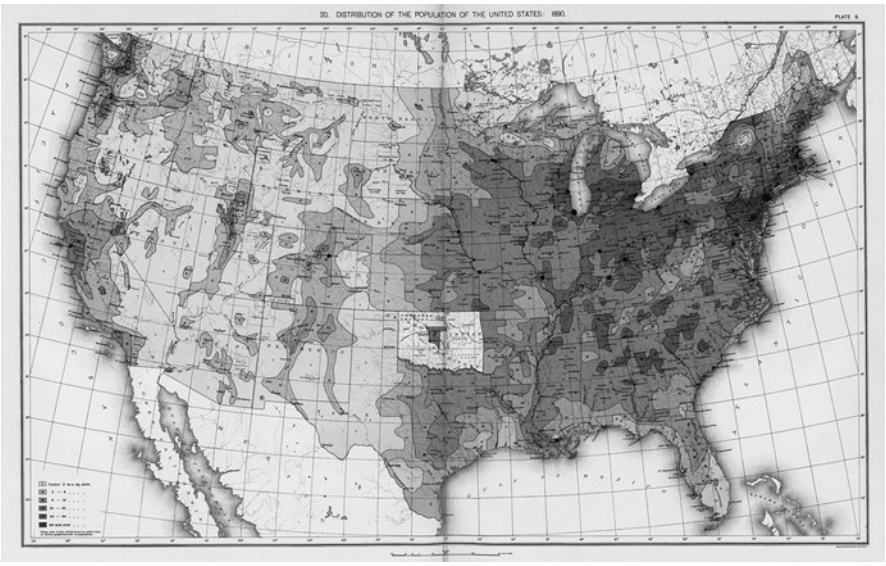


FIGURE 3. US population density in 1890. US Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/1890/dec/1890-population-distribution.html).

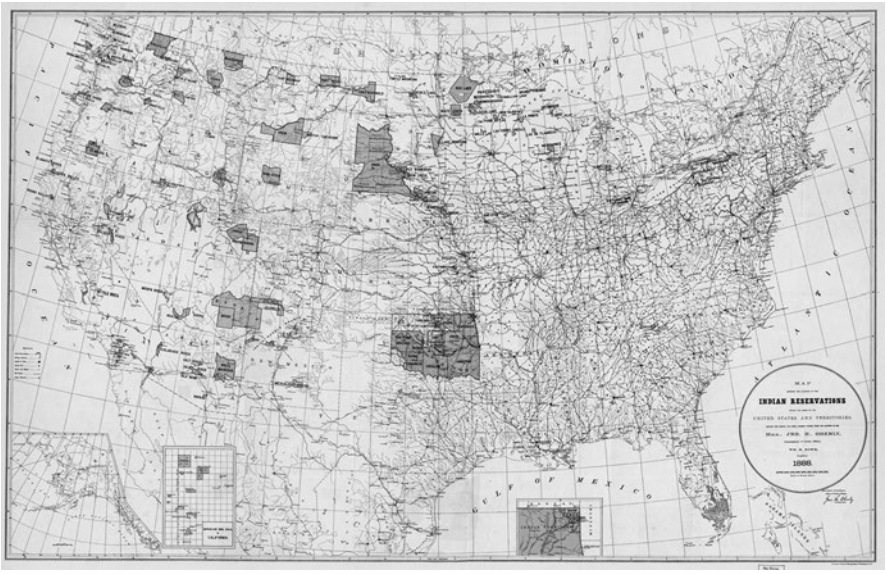


FIGURE 4. Indian reservations in 1888. Bureau of Indian Affairs (available at https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/hornbeck_ind_2/7/).

Although the process varied greatly by reservation and territory, allotment constituted yet another wave of violent theft and cultural annihilation that followed so closely on the heels of the reservation era that most Americans do not understand its uniquely dispossessive impact. By most estimates, before the allotment era ended in 1934, the Indigenous land base of the continental United States decreased by two-thirds as sales transferred land from Native owners to white farmers and extractive interests—a shocking figure rendered invisible or opaque by contemporary maps showing reservation boundaries that reveal nothing about land ownership or authority within. In Indian Territory, the western portion fell first. First opened for sale in 1889 was a box-shaped parcel located in the center of the territory that the federal government had taken in the Reconstruction treaties but never assigned to a relocated Indigenous group. Then Congress, applauding the incoming rush of population, created the Oklahoma Territory in 1890—a sudden act of political incorporation over the entire western portion, never mind the fact that reservation lands still covered almost all of it. Organizing an official US territory extended legal rights to present and future white settlers and put the region on the path to statehood. Now the map was divided, roughly equally, into two parts: the Oklahoma Territory in the western portion of the future state, and still-sovereign Indian Territory in the East (fig. 5).

Federal agents next coerced allotment agreements from each reservation in the Oklahoma Territory, and settlers and speculators poured in to claim their pieces in a frenetic spasm of land runs and lotteries during the 1890s and early 1900s. Attention also turned east, toward the Indian Territory that remained under the sovereignty of each of the Five Nations. The Dawes Act had initially exempted the Five Nations, but a commission headed by none other than retired senator Henry Dawes set out from Washington in 1894 to compel the allotment of Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw lands. Congress strengthened the bargaining position of the Dawes Commission by abolishing all tribal laws and courts in 1898 and bringing all residents, Indian and non-Indian, under direct federal authority. Allotment wiped out the tribal land base of the Five Nations. From a starting point of around 19.5 million acres, almost 16 million acres were privatized immediately, and the remainder was sold at public auction or held in trust by the Interior Department.[12]

With denationalization and the initial stages of allotment accomplished by 1902, Congress prepared to create one new state. In Indian Territory, delegates met at a convention in 1905 and defensively drew up a new constitution for their own state of Sequoyah. But Congress wouldn't hear of it. The

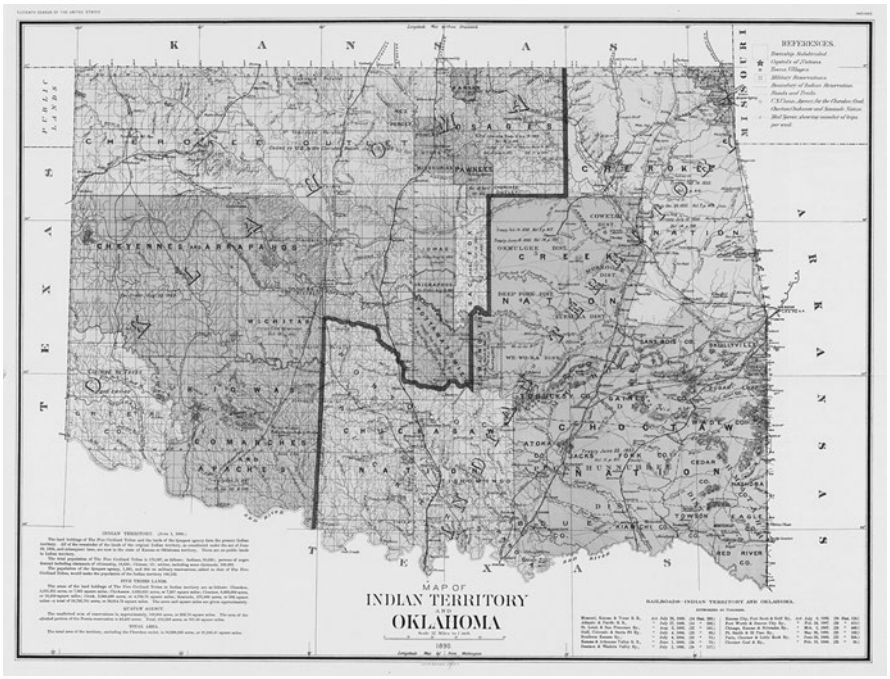


FIGURE 5. US Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory in 1890. Library of Congress (https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4020.ct011159/).

white residents and future voters of both territories were mostly Southern Democrats, and the Republican Congress was ready to tolerate one, but not two, Democratic-leaning states. Oklahoma entered the union as a single state in 1907, with every Native nation's land allotted and its government extinguished.

Indeed, the substantial white population of Indian Territory reveals a more complicated history of the area's social composition. By 1890, in fact, whites already outnumbered Indians two to one; by 1910, just after statehood, four out of five residents of Oklahoma were white. Within the Five Nations there had been a slaveholding class who operated cotton plantations. After the Civil War, this class merged with economic modernizers, usually of "mixed blood" and intermarried with whites, who desired to take part in the bounty of nineteenth-century capitalism and to educate their children for those roles. Hoping to develop more resources and to cultivate commercial and industrial activities, these Native elites often welcomed white immigrants who came legally to work as their agents, employees, and tenants. The Indian nations also conveyed tribal citizenship—and with it, the right to improve private parcels of land—to white men who married Native women. Denigrated as

opportunistic and sleazy "squaw men," the lower-class segment of this male population blended in with the numerous aspiring white farmers who simply snuck in and squatted illegally.

African Americans made up more than 8 percent of the state's population by 1910, a figure that also topped that of the Indian population. The treaties after the Civil War had required the Five Nations to free enslaved people and grant them citizenship, and while each Nation resisted and stymied Black integration, African Americans in the Indian Territory enjoyed comparatively more freedom and opportunity than elsewhere. As enrolled citizens of one of the Five Nations, they were also entitled to private allotments in the late 1890s and early 1900s, a development that occurred nowhere else in the South. Drawn to a hoped-for promised land, other African Americans migrated to the Oklahoma Territory and participated in the land runs and lotteries. However, racist intimidation and violence prevented African Americans from claiming land on the same terms as whites, and groups of Black migrants often worked together to purchase land from speculators. Many all-Black towns sprouted up, and news of the comparative freedoms of Oklahoma attracted more hopeful Black migrants. Statehood, however, created the political structures of white supremacy (the new legislature's very first order of business was a segregation law), and whites met Black advancement and immigration with exclusion and terror. Disfranchisement proceeded less straightforwardly than segregation but was accomplished with more roundabout means by 1916.

As for white settlement, two different patterns of migration populated the state, giving it a bifurcated cultural and agricultural character. Midwesterners occupied the north and west, while Southerners moved into the south and east. Before statehood, many of these farmers occupied the land illegally, but many also leased land from Indians and worked as the tenants of Indian landowners. Under allotment, the federal government initially restricted the rights of Indians to sell or lease their property. But it soon succumbed to popular pressure, from white settlers as well as Indians, and gradually loosened these restrictions. This threw the land and rental markets wide open to hundreds of manipulative speculators and devious businessmen who swarmed the former Indian Territory and swindled land from allottees and wards with methods that ranged from deception to murder. "Grafting" was the name given to this widespread practice of locating non-Indians on Indian allotments.[13] Grafters seized their chances when restricted and nontaxable allotments suddenly transitioned to fee-simple title and became subject to property taxes and creditor liens, and they took advantage of Indians'

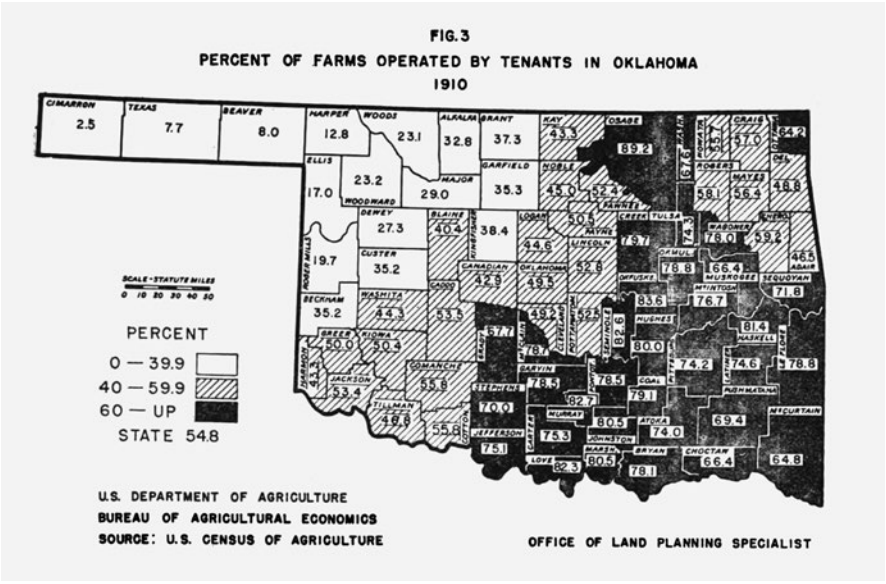


FIGURE 6. Tenancy in Oklahoma, 1910. From John H. Southern, "Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma" (Stillwater, OK: Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 239, 1939), 9.

unfamiliarity with real estate law, contracts, deeds, and probate.[14] The result: Most white farmers, especially in the former lands of the Five Nations, were no more likely to own their own farms. They became the tenants and sharecroppers of those who had acquired title to Indian land.

While the small farmer's position unraveled across the entire country, the process was uniquely and painfully acute in Oklahoma. In the south and east, the rural landscape was characterized by small cotton farms operated by impoverished tenants and sharecroppers who were locked out of credit. Toward the north and west—where more of the land had been cheap or free, given the homestead structure of the land runs and the lotteries in Oklahoma Territory—many of the settlers arrived without cash or capital and had to mortgage their land immediately to begin operations. In 1890 less than 1 percent of the territory's farmers had been tenants. By 1910 more than half of the state's farmers were tenants, and that figure reached two-thirds in the eastern part of the state, where cotton dominated (fig. 6). Of the landowners in the state as a whole, four-fifths carried heavy mortgage debt.[15]

Scholars have produced a vast body of work on socialism in Oklahoma, but the topic faded from historical attention in the 1990s. Because Indian Territory and Oklahoma are such rich settings for studies of racial formation and racial division, most of the recent literature explores Black, Indigenous, and white relations.[16] It is understandable that within this set of concerns, white politics

FIGURE 7. Eugene Debs speaking at an encampment in Snyder, Oklahoma; no date. Photograph reproduced with permission from the Oklahoma Labor Studies Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma.

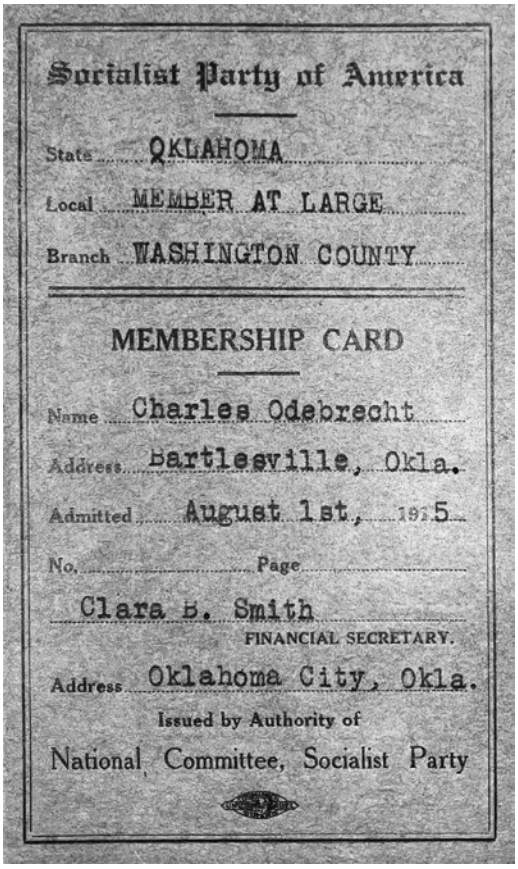
in the territorial and early-statehood eras—whether conservative, progressive, or radical—is largely understood as constitutive of the region's unusual yet definitive path to white supremacy and elite economic domination. The Socialist leadership, for example, demanded full economic and political equality for African Americans and actively campaigned against disfranchisement between 1912 and 1916, which they accurately understood as threatening the working class as a whole. For this defense of Black voting rights, the Socialist Party received an avalanche of abuse from its partisan rivals. Meanwhile the rank-and-file members of the Socialist Party remained racist and exclusionary, and while some Black newspapers acknowledged the position of the party and affirmed the hostility that African Americans faced from both the Democrats and the Republicans, actually joining the Socialist Party was too great a risk for African Americans aspiring to political and commercial respectability.[17]

The older literature on socialism, in contrast, mostly reconstructs a remarkable movement of the dirt-poor and downtrodden who paid their party dues, gathered in enormous encampments every summer, listened with rapt attention to hours-long speeches, subscribed to their local Socialist weekly, and refused to defer to the town, landed, and legal elites (figs. 7, 8, and 9). The Socialist Party of Oklahoma grew first from the remnants of the Populist

FIGURE 8. First Socialist convention in Okemah, Oklahoma, 1907. Photograph reproduced with permission from the John Dunning Political Collection, Box 3, Folder 34, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Party and then the Farmers' Union, but these movements had emphasized the unity of all rural society against Northern plutocracy; in Oklahoma they were dominated by landowners and business interests and offered no outlet for renter and tenant outrage. It is no wonder the state's Democratic elite engaged in voter suppression in 1916 to counter the Socialist threat and snuffed it out completely during World War I with criminal conspiracy charges. Quashing white radicalism was the counterpart to quashing Black advancement. Like the Tulsa race massacre of 1921, the suppression of leftists solidified white elite control and erased memories of a more diverse and participatory political period.

But how did the political radicals understand Indigenous history? And did they ever acknowledge the processes of land privatization and dispossession that continued to unfold alongside the growth of the Socialist Party? While the older scholarship on socialism certainly flags Native denationalization, allotment, and capitalist land accumulation as key determinants of widespread white tenancy that underlay the growth of socialism, the earlier generation of historians asked questions fundamentally unrelated to empire. For example, they wondered how Southwestern Socialists reconciled


Socialist Party of America

State OKLAHOMA

Local MEMBER AT LARGE

Branch WASHINGTON COUNTY

MEMBERSHIP CARD

Name Charles Odebrecht

Address Bartlesville, Okla.

Admitted August 1st, 1915

No. Page

Clara B. Smith
FINANCIAL SECRETARY.

Address Oklahoma City, Okla.

Issued by Authority of

National Committee, Socialist Party

FIGURE 9. Socialist Party membership card, 1915. Reproduced with permission from the John Dunning Political Collection, Box 3, Folder 33, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

widespread land hunger with Marxist industrial doctrine; whether the religiosity and racism of the Socialist rank and file undermined its radical validity; whether outside leadership was needed to catalyze the local movement; and how historians should value and weigh the "indigenous" components of Oklahoma socialism. Of course, by "indigenous" these scholars did not mean any Native influence; they meant the uniquely "American" (as opposed to European or urban) threads: the promise of secure smallholder land tenure and the movement's demographic and theological overlap with evangelical Protestantism.

It is tempting to reflect on the earlier scholarship's use of the term "indigenous" to mean "American" in an exceptional national sense, instead of "Native American," the way it is used today. One certainly wonders whether the older use of the term clouded the possible consideration of socialism's actual relationship with Indigeneity. I say "Indigeneity" in the reified intellectual sense

because there is little to no evidence that Oklahoma Socialists ever seriously reached out to Indians or considered them a voting constituency worth sustained pursuit. I did discover that in early 1911, the Socialist Party's State Executive Committee announced that "our Indian friends in the eastern part of the state are being robbed of their lands daily by the unscrupulous land grafters" and that they resolved to "devise some plan by which the Indians may be taught the principles of Socialism."[18] I could not discover whether anyone took up this task, but the paternalistic rhetoric, combined with the state's overwhelmingly white demographics, suggest they did not. A special census at the time of statehood found that Indians made up only 9 percent of Oklahoma's population.[19] In 1910, whites made up 80 percent. Gathering up those newly enfranchised votes in a new state was precisely the point of the reformist Socialist Party, which aimed for a majoritarian, democratic, and legitimate transition to the cooperative commonwealth.

On the Indian side, it is likely that only the better-off and mixed-race members voted in American elections. The extension of US citizenship was backhanded and premised on imperial incorporation: the acceptance of land privatization and denationalization. Many communally oriented fullbloods resisted allotment and conquest well into the twentieth century, and others navigated the allotment regime to sustain family and village ties in isolation.[20] One survey of Native newspapers turned up no references to the Socialist Party, but most Indian papers had folded or transferred ownership soon after statehood in any case.[21] I discovered a notice in a Socialist newspaper that a leaflet titled "Why the Indian Should Vote the Socialist Ticket" was being printed in the Choctaw language in 1912, but if any such leaflet has survived, in English or an Indian language, historians have yet to find it.[22]

For Socialist sources, we have almost two dozen newspapers, some archival records and personal papers, a few essays and pamphlets by central figures, and one full-length autobiography. Scattered in these sources are enough references to Indians to conclude that Oklahoma's radicals occasionally considered the Indian question but consistently pivoted from conquest to capitalism's next set of victims: white farmers. They spun frontier Native victimhood, and the continuities of victimhood in Oklahoma, into an urgent new mission: dethroning Indian grafters and distributing land to the poor.

It would be unreasonable to expect an American political party to challenge territorial conquest after the fact. Denationalization, allotment, and the entrenchment of white tenancy were faits accomplis. My intention is rather an intellectual and rhetorical analysis: to describe how political radicals—still immersed in imperial processes—*digested* empire; how they acknowledged

it and immediately adapted it to leftist and even admirable causes. The best writing comes from a small number of Oklahoma Socialists who achieved national prominence. I take no position on the question of whether the Oklahoma movement was catalyzed by a cadre of such outsiders. But the most revealing and well-composed commentary on the Indian question comes from the published work of two dedicated activists not originally from the state: Kate Richards O'Hare and Oscar Ameringer.

Kate Richards O'Hare, known as "Red Kate" for her flaming hair as well as her politics, rose to national prominence as a popular Socialist orator before being imprisoned in the Missouri State Penitentiary for criticizing US involvement in World War I.[23] Born in 1876 in a Kansas sod house, Kate Richards always felt sympathy for struggling farmers because her father failed as a homesteader, took up work in Kansas City, and lodged his family in the town's poorest section. Richards trained as a teacher in Nebraska but returned to Missouri to help her family, where she got involved in voluntary social causes and surprised her father and his employees by taking up work as a machinist in his shop. Coming of age as a worker in a male-dominated field, she joined a labor union, debated labor issues, read reformist literature, and resolved to take on a new life's mission after hearing a rousing Socialist speech from Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.

In 1901, Richards moved to Girard, Kansas, where Julius A. Wayland had established a heartland village for radicals. Girard was home to the *Appeal to Reason*, a Socialist paper with a sizable national circulation owing to an extensive network of volunteer salesmen, and also to the International School of Socialist Economy, where Kate met her husband, Frank O'Hare. After their marriage on Wayland's porch, the O'Hares traveled around the country speaking in labor hot spots. In 1904 they moved to Oklahoma Territory and settled in the town of Chandler, located on the former Sac and Fox Reservation, on the western border of the Creek Nation. Frank took up a job in Oklahoma City as a state Socialist organizer while Kate remained determined to keep up writing and lecturing, even with the responsibility of four children (the middle twins were named Eugene and Victor, after Eugene Victor Debs). The O'Hares led an active social and political life within the movement, and Kate, along with Debs, was a favorite speaker at the large encampments that drew hundreds of people each summer. After the election of 1908 in Oklahoma, which revealed significant growth in Socialist support, Frank O'Hare's health collapsed, and the couple moved to Kansas City.[24] Kate's star grew brighter as Frank's faded. After her release from prison in 1920, Kate reached the height of her fame when she led the "Children's

Crusade," a cross-country march and two-month vigil outside the White House to demand the release of political prisoners.

In 1906, Kate O'Hare published an essay about Oklahoma in the *International Socialist Review*, a monthly published in Chicago. "The Land of Graft" offered up an extended analysis of the Indian question, with a voice and perspective that the author intended to be empathetic and politically prescient.[25] She opened with the O'Hares' summer arrival in Indian Territory, where they pitched their tent by a beautiful stream and met a most "agreeable" companion of educated Scotch-Irish and Cherokee stock, Don Murphy, who told them tales of graft and grafters and who revealed the hidden secrets of the visible wealth of many Indian Territory towns. "You have read a lot about the immense sums of money expended on the lazy Indian by the government," Murphy declared, "but mark my words, the Indian has received little but red tape and the grafter has come for the rest." O'Hare pressed Murphy for examples of "legitimate businessmen"—surely there must be some in the Indian Territory? "Possibly, ma'am," Murphy replied, "but they are men of small means . . . men who have not yet learned how much easier it is to make a living by grafting than by business . . . or the men who are naturally too honest to be anything but poor."[26]

Alarmed by Murphy's assertions, O'Hare set off to investigate the Indian Territory's economic history. She found a resource-rich land plagued with lawyers and corporate parasites. "Small as is the Indians' domain at the present time, it is a land of untold richness," she explained to her readers, and "thereon hangs the tale" of the grafter:

> The unlimited opportunities for the Indian Territory lawyer to turn an honest penny is quite beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Naturally the real, large, luscious plums fall to the lot of the favored few, the real aristocracy of Grafterdom. . . . Great corporations have come to Indian Territory to bring the stores of unlimited wealth from the earth and there are many negotiations between the corporations and the Indians which means fat fees for the lawyers. . . . When the Indian with his characteristic ignorance of the value of money has one big spree he will find himself penniless, the little grafters have his money, the big ones his land.[27]

While O'Hare perceived the frenetic energy with which aggressive private and corporate interests consolidated control over the natural resources of Indian Territory, and while she recounted their desire for statehood to better continue these pursuits, she did not mention the Curtis Act of 1898 or the

Dawes Commission. Neither did she use the word "allotment," nor did she attempt to recount the recent chronology of denationalization, the ongoing methods of land dispossession, or the precise channels of speculator and corporate influence. It took another three decades, in fact, for anyone to publish that full story. Angie Debo's 1940 masterpiece, *And Still the Waters Run*, remains the most thoroughly documented and researched account of the era's deception, corruption, and impoverishment—what Debo called a "vast criminal conspiracy." But Debo also insisted that the facts hit her personally like a "revelation"; she "had grown up in Oklahoma without knowing that these things were so."[28]

Observers at the time most certainly knew these things were happening, Socialists especially. But unlike Debo, they did not take direct issue with American imperial expansion; they pivoted to the injustices of the twentieth-century economic order. In 1940, Debo would depict the Five Nations at the close of the nineteenth century as consensually attached to communal landholding and national sovereignty. She would argue that by forcing political termination and land allotment, the United States had violated solemn treaties and strangled a legitimate way of life. Every subsequent scholar of Oklahoma has followed in Debo's footsteps. I say this to make an important comparison with O'Hare specifically, and with the Oklahoma Socialists more generally: They more often sketched a much vaguer story of Indians undercut by the state and plutocrats, caught up in a process for which they were unprepared. They were a still-primitive people locked in an earlier stage of human evolution. The Indian "is just a man in the childhood of the race," O'Hare explained, "just a little parcel of the fargone past, ruthlessly tossed into the hustling present."[29]

Toward what conclusion was O'Hare headed in "The Land of Graft"? In the territories right now, she said, there is a "cloud appearing on the horizon of the Land O Graft and its shadow is weighing heavy on the heart of the grafter." That cloud was the gathering strength of Socialism. The Socialist organizers who fanned out across the territories found increasing support among the "white farmer and mechanic" who were "harassed and disgusted with the exactions of the grafters, and willing to consider any proposition that promises relief." O'Hare was so hopeful about the party's prospects that she wondered whether "the Socialist will not only force statehood, but write the constitution as well."[30]

Here we see the political pivot from empire. The territories must become nationally incorporated as a state because enfranchised voters (who might

soon include those disfranchised white farmers and mechanics residing in the Five Nations) needed political power to position the cloud over the grafters' heads and bring down the rain of social justice. And the economic pivot? The story of the Indians was not one of lost sovereignty but of their victimization, first by the US government and now by capitalist forces. Statehood, O'Hare ruefully predicted, will be "the last scene in the drama of the American Indian. . . . The full-blood is rapidly disappearing under the hot-house process we have inflicted upon him, the mixed-blood is being assimilated by the white race, and through the law of the survival of the fittest, the Indian is fast disappearing; meanwhile, that parasite, the grafter, flourishes like a Trust after a federal investigation."[31] After threading the childlike Indians neatly into a prequel of state and elite malfeasance, O'Hare could call for all hands on deck to confront the modern capitalist threat.

Oscar Ameringer arrived in Oklahoma in 1907, a year after O'Hare, but stayed much, much longer—until his death in 1943. Ameringer was both an institution builder and an intellectual: a party man, circuit rider, editor, and pamphleteer.[32] Born in a Swabian village in Germany in 1870, in a country caught up in monarchical and martial sentiment, he fled to the United States at age sixteen, joined a German woodworkers' union in Cincinnati, and then roamed the country as a musician, portrait artist, and ladies' man. He marched in the 1886 strikes for an eight-hour day and "discovered industrial unionism, Jeffersonian democracy, and Mark Twain's humor before he studied Marxism."[33]

After settling down in Columbus, Ohio, with a wife and three children, Ameringer became an instant convert to Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. He ran unsuccessfully for office as a single-taxer, joined the Socialist Party around 1901, and remained committed to radical, redistributive taxation as both a democratic idea and a workable political strategy. He went to New Orleans to edit the newspaper of the Brewery Workers' Union and assisted white and Black dockworkers in their fight against employers and conservative craft unions. He moved to Oklahoma in 1907 with the vague intention of helping the poor in a "brand-new state" where there might be "less resistance to white and black uplift." There Ameringer found a "live socialist movement" and never left.[34] He devoted himself to the Socialist cause as an editor and administrator, but especially as a popular speaker who brought in the converts with off-color jokes and a biting, satirical wit (fig. 10).[35] His 1940 autobiography, *If You Don't Weaken*, was widely reviewed in East Coast literary circles—the "brain belt," he called it—and the middle chapters on Oklahoma contain an extraordinary account of Ameringer's travels among

FIGURE 10. Picnic at a Socialist encampment, 1909 or 1910. Ameringer is fourth from the right. Photograph reproduced with permission from the Oklahoma Labor Studies Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma.

the rural underclass, Oklahoma's abject poverty, and the political culture of its Socialist community.

Unlike urban counterparts such as Victor Berger and other Marxist stalwarts, who viewed farmers as petty capitalists and affirmed the "idiocy of rural life," Ameringer understood that many Americans had rooted their democratic hopes in the soil. He liked farmers—their generosity to strangers and heaping dinner tables. He admired the proud Black Forest peasants, the Pennsylvania Dutch, and the smallholders of Ohio's Pickaway Plains, with a "huge manure pile in front of their great barns" indicating attachment to permanence and community. All these examples represented an "idea of farm life so much superior to the corporation farms and tenantry-cursed plantations I was to see later."[36] Indeed, on his first speaking tour through the state, the miserable living standards of Oklahoma's tenants sent Ameringer into shock. Gathered in one schoolhouse was an "indescribable aggregation of moisture, steam, dirt, rags, unshaven men, slatternly women, and fretting children"—and they were farmers? "I had come upon another America!" A night spent in one of the "better tenant shacks" involved a cot without a mattress; a cold breakfast of cornbread, molasses, and chicory "coffee"; and a nocturnal phalanx of bedbugs, mosquitoes, and chiggers, who "seemed

exceedingly fond of itinerant socialists."[37] These people needed not uplift from above, but upheaval from below:

> I saw a white man begging a Choctaw squaw man who owned the only remaining spring in that neighborhood to let him have credit for a few buckets of water for his thirsty family. . . . I saw smug, well dressed, overly well fed hypocrites march to church on Sabbath day, Bibles under their arms, praying for God's kingdom on earth while fattening like latter-day cannibals on the sharecroppers. I saw politicians geysering Jeffersonian platitudes without even knowing, much less caring, that they were addressing as wretched a set of abject slaves as ever walked the face of the earth.[38]

Ameringer formed part of a small cohort of national Socialist Party members who demanded that its platform reconcile the Marxist understanding of farmers as doomed little capitalists with a practical American understanding of highly indebted and landless farmers as fellow workers—a version of which the party accepted in 1912.[39] The Oklahoma Socialist Party, however, raced ahead of the nationals in devising land platforms that spoke directly to the population's yearning for stability and predictability. In 1909, Ameringer helped found the Oklahoma Renter's Union and wrote its Declaration of Principles. He emphatically declared to Oklahoma's tenants and sharecroppers that they indeed made up the working class:

> The rural population at present is composed of classes whose interests are antagonistic to each other. On the one hand, we have a small class of landowners who possess large tracts of land, but who do not work land. On the other hand, we have a large class of renters who till the soil but do not own it. . . . Every new discovery, every improvement of machinery, is appropriated by the Landlord while the working tenants receive only so much as to live a life of misery, toil, and starvation. The owning class control the powers of State, Press, and largely the pulpit.[40]

Beginning in 1909, the Oklahoma Socialist Party also promised a democratic land policy in addition to the "principles set forth in our national program."[41] Once in control of the government, they would levy heavy taxes on land monopolies and speculators, and use the proceeds to increase the public domain for tenant settlement. The farmer would pay rent to the government for a limited period of time but would gain full use and occupancy rights for his and his heirs' lifetimes. The land could never be sold on the private market, but the settler retained ownership over his tools, buildings, and improvements. This was not exactly a new Homestead Act,

but neither was it a plan to confiscate the land and divide it into state-run operations. "Most farmers imagine that the private ownership of the farm is the only thinkable arrangement by which they can obtain the product of their labor," Ameringer explained, "but this is not the case. . . . THE RIGHT TO THE USE OF THE LAND WILL INSURE [*sic*] THE PRODUCT TO THE PRODUCER AS EFFECTIVELY AS OUTRIGHT OWNERSHIP."[42]

The land platform was not an updated Homestead Act, because there could never be another Homestead Act: Socialists asserted that the frontier was gone and that the agricultural ladder had folded. This is why this moment of political ideology formed a significant departure from the age-old Euro-American anger at aristocratic land relations, land hoarding, and greedy speculators.[43] The country had filled in, the escape hatch had disappeared, and industrial relations would everywhere replace agrarian ones. The agricultural working class and the industrial working class must understand their parallel situations. With their land platform, the Oklahoma Socialists intended to delay and humanize the inevitable process of consolidation for farmworkers, tenants, and highly indebted smallholders. We shall place "a check to the expropriation of the farming class by the capitalists," Ameringer explained, "while at the same time open a way for the development of cooperative farming and the gradual nationalization of the land."[44] In 1983, Ameringer's biographer declared the proposal "a unique product of urban and rural radicalism—an indigenous, socialist land program."[45]

"Indigenous"? The territory's Indian nations had just fought bitterly against political extermination and vehemently defended communal landholding as a system well suited for maintaining the poor while offering outlets for entrepreneurial energy.[46] The entire thrust of federal allotment policy was to rid Native territory of communal land governance. And now, just a decade later, the Socialists proposed to bring it back. This is not ironic. It was an act of radical imperial digestion, converting an existing geography of conquest into a landscape of modern social justice. If there was any Socialist acknowledgment of the Oklahoma farm platform's similarity to the communal land arrangements in the former Indian Territory, I have yet to find it.

The Oklahoma Socialist Party State Platform as a whole, in fact, contained just two references to Indians. The first indicated an understanding of the government policies that facilitated such extensive graft and fraud, in that the party demanded an end to professional guardianship "for the purpose of cutting out court expenses and lawyer fees, which are now gobbling

up practically all the income from small estates, especially that of Indians in the eastern part of the state."[47] The federal government required that Indian minors and restricted Indians (those with 50 percent or more Indian blood) be assigned professional white guardians for the purposes of managing annuities and allotments. After 1908, jurisdiction over such matters was transferred from federal courts to local probate courts, and this opened the door to even more aggressive, unscrupulous, and violent methods for deception and accumulation.[48] With this clause demanding the end to guardianship, the Socialists officially objected to the means of dispossession, its frenetic and fraudulent character, but not to empire per se. Guardianships and graft were how Oklahoma elites obtained their money and their power, and how they controlled both the government and the two rival political parties.

The next reference to Indians in the State Platform indicated that the party itself intended to take advantage of Native land sales to address the tenant problem. The platform provided details about how the public domain would be expanded, complementary with confiscatory taxation: through the retention of school lands, the reclamation and purchase of arid and overflow lands, and land seized for nonpayment of taxes. A final avenue of land acquisition would be "by the purchase of segregated and unallotted Indian lands."[49] Unallotted lands were those acres the government considered "surplus" after the initial distribution of privatized parcels. A typical notice for the sale of such lands in the former Chickasaw Nation read: "The government sale of unallotted lands in Carter County will open in Ardmore, December 23."[50] The Socialists, in other words, would also scrape up former Five Nations land but would assign those acres to a better purpose.

Again, it would be unreasonable to expect a Native land restitution plank in the platform of a third party trying to grab votes from Democrats and Republicans. The historical significance lies in chronological overlap. The public-ownership ideal of agrarian radicalism took shape alongside and in reaction to Indian dispossession, not after it; and the Socialists proceeded with what appears to be a willful ignorance of the recent sovereign models of Native communal landholding. Most Americans, Socialists included, essentially understood Indians as a dying and defeated race, whatever empathy they might have expressed for the manner of dispossession. "Firewater, unnatural environment, slow pauperization, tuberculosis, and syphilis were finishing the civilization of the five civilized tribes," Oscar Ameringer later wrote in his autobiography, "a process of deterioration begun by the manufacturers of Colt revolvers and barbed-wire fence."[51]


MAY

INDIAN LAND SALES!

PUBLIC NOTICE is hereby given that sealed bids for the following allotted lands will be received at the office of

S. A. MILLS, District Agent,

ARDMORE, OKLAHOMA,

until TWO P. M. on date hereinafter fixed when such bids will be publicly opened at such place:

BIDS FOR THE FOLLOWING TO BE OPENED ON

MAY 10, 1911

FIGURE 11. Indian land sale flyer, 1911. Reproduced with permission from the David A. Stovall Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

At the time, however, Ameringer's newspaper editorials did describe the more specific process of allotment sales and land privatization that overlapped with the Socialist movement. But he deployed his descriptions of the contemporary situation as a primer on the sources of white exploitation and the necessity for political action. The gradual removal of restrictions over the first decades of the twentieth century expanded the number of enrolled Indians who could sell their acres, opening up a great deal of previously Native land to market sale (fig. 11). Ameringer had to get from that situation to the concerns of his readers. "The government of the United States made landlords out of the Indians," he wrote, "supported by half-starved cotton raisers." This would be bad enough, he continued, but the Indians were also under renewed attack "by swarms of leeches, parasites, and grafters. . . . The land is leased by the land grafters and parcelled out among the farmers at exhorbitant [*sic*] rent." And what did his readers need to know? That Socialists stood against this feudalism while their main rivals reveled in it. "Court officials, sheriffs, and judges work in cayhoot [*sic*] with the land sharks. . . . This motley aggregation of perjurers, forgers, and thieves form the backbone of the Democratic Party of Oklahoma."[52]

Oscar Ameringer ultimately understood Indian victimhood as a prequel to modern issues of economic exploitation. Like Kate O'Hare, he did not pause to question the morality of conquest or to recount its specific chronology. Instead, he threaded Native dissolution into a seamless story about the government and capitalist elites and the next set of victims: landless white

farmers. Ameringer omitted the very recent details of American imperial policy in eastern Oklahoma (denationalization and allotment), and he analyzed Native dissolution as coterminous with, and even a contributor to, the formation of an oppressed agricultural working class:

> The Indian Territory had been given to the Indians under a sacred treaty, signed by the Great White Father in Washington, providing it should be theirs "as long as water flows and grass grows green." . . . The Indian was not a bad landlord. . . . So long as his superior Anglo-Saxon land slave could supply him with a hog or jug of fire water now and then, in addition to the meager dole he received from the White Father in Washington, he was contented. Later on . . . poor Lo's income went up as his white tenant's went down. Still later, when squaw men, usurers, land sharks, and Eastern insurance companies had come into possession of most of poor Lo's inheritance . . . the position of the tenants and sharecroppers hit rock-bottom.[53]

Although Ameringer's *Oklahoma Pioneer* offered the lengthiest commentary on Native history, other Socialist newspapers also tied Indian victimhood to corporate chicanery, capitalist forces, and the Democratic Party. They reported on allotment fraud, the outrages of guardianship, and the difficulty of making an honest living in the state without succumbing to graft.[54] They also commented on social and class divisions within Indian societies. *The New Century*, for example, explained how a handful of "influential Indians" worked with coal corporations to separate surface rights from mineral rights, while "the Indian leaders who were true to their people protested in every possible manner." *The New Century* also asserted that at the moment of statehood it was the "better educated" Indians who first presented their land to "speculators and capitalists."[55] Such observations offer an important perspective: When white Oklahomans looked around, they observed wealthier, more assimilated Indians at odds with poorer, more traditional ones. They did not consider how all Native people were navigating the loss of sovereignty and territory.[56] Without a doubt, it was far easier to denounce capitalism instead of colonialism when some Indians eagerly participated in the system and others did not.

The New Century was published in Sulphur, Oklahoma, where Socialists in the former Chickasaw Nation had direct experience with ongoing Indian land sales, graft, and white cotton tenancy. Papers in northwestern Oklahoma, however, spun more abstract tales about Indians as part of America's recently concluded frontier past. A 1912 rumination on "The Pioneer Farmer" in the *Grant County Socialist*, for example, cast Indians as the first casualties

of capitalist forces and farmers the next. The newspaper catered to its readers with a chest-thumping story written in melodramatic prose:

> It was the pioneer farmer who faced danger from hostile Indians, made hostile by the cunning deceptions practiced upon them by the greedy propertied class. . . . With the Indian and the unconquered forest before him, and the greedy aristocracy of wealth behind him, the farmer's life was full of trials, dangers, and adventures. . . . No sooner had the farmer reached the Pacific and turned to face the East than he looked square into the face of greedy capitalism . . . the monster upon his heels demanding his home in every meaning of the word . . . teeth and claws dripping with the blood of the victims.[57]

The *Grant County Socialist* replaced Indian victimhood with agrarian oppression as deftly as O'Hare and Ameringer had.

In the middle of the night on October 1, 1910, the Los Angeles *Times* building went up in flames after a suitcase left in a back alley exploded. It contained an alarm clock and sixteen sticks of dynamite. The labor unionists who hatched the plot had not meant to commit murder, but Angelenos howled in righteous outrage at the terror that killed almost two dozen people.[58] Among the least remembered outcomes of the *Times* bombing was a blue-ribbon federal Commission on Industrial Relations authorized by Congress in 1912 to investigate work conditions and labor laws across the country. In 1913, a new presidential administration stocked the commission with a progressive roster of labor lawyers, social workers, academics, and middle-of-the-road businessmen. The commission and staff spent months conducting research and holding public hearings across the country. It poked its nose into almost every industrial dispute of the era, heard from common people as well as elites, and most famously raked an indignant John D. Rockefeller over the coals for the Ludlow Massacre. While its work resulted in only a handful of new policies, the commission's greater impact lay in its "agitational service"; it was the first time labor told its own story alongside capitalists, and the first time that representatives of the federal government listened seriously to ordinary workers and weighed their evidence against that presented by employers.[59]

One might assume that a Commission on Industrial Relations would take a pass on agriculture, but the topic made a notable appearance. The commissioners and staff investigated how agriculture in two parts of the country had acquired an industrial character. They focused on a wage-earning and migratory working class in California and a shockingly high number of impoverished white tenants in Texas and Oklahoma. Adversarial class relations in

these two regions not only upended traditional understandings of American farm opportunity and rural harmony; these places were also sites of significant worker unrest. Employers at the Durst Ranch in Wheatland, California, for example, had callously arranged for an oversupply of hop pickers in 1913. They then lowered wages, provided no water or toilets, called in the police to disrupt worker organization, and viciously suppressed the resulting "riot."[60] Less violence had erupted among the downtrodden cotton tenants of north Texas and eastern Oklahoma, but they too were caught up in an industrial structure that offered no relief, and in the Southwest, the landlord-tenant struggle had reached a boiling point with the growth of the Renters' Union and Socialist Party. "Our land inheritance is slipping away," chief field investigator Charles Holman declared on March 16, 1915, at the opening of the Dallas hearings, "and its ownership tends to become concentrated just as capital today is concentrated. . . . The tenants, who constitute the majority of the farming population, are arriving at the status of wage laborers."[61]

Holman explained that the commission would examine the "southwestern land struggle" and the rise of a "class-conscious movement" among its tenant farmers. In Texas, he said, where forty years ago practically all farmers owned their land, now more than half of farmers rented it. In Oklahoma, where the tenancy rate was higher, "large blocks of land originally owned by Indians have been wrested from them . . . and the tendency towards land concentration proceeds unchecked." The region's alarming conditions and endemic white poverty resulted from many factors: absentee landowners, usurious money lenders and merchants, Indian-lease speculators, contract demands for increasing percentages of cotton, and arbitrary and extralegal landowner tactics. These elements, combined with census figures showing that "fifty percent of the tenants had lived on their farms for less than a year," meant for Holman that "the relation of the so-called tenant to the landowner is analogous to that of the wageworker to the employer." The commission's work, Holman hoped, might include specific ameliorative policy suggestions, but the investigations also demanded a more fundamental shift in economic thinking. The United States no longer possessed an agricultural frontier; any plans to increase the rural population with immigrants and urban migrants would have the same effect as "an irritation of an unhealed wound."[62]

The commission in Dallas heard from the governor of Texas, professional farm advocates and reform leaders, tenants, landlords, real estate agents, lawyers, bankers, merchants, agricultural researchers, and college professors, before publishing its work the following year as almost four hundred pages of testimony and exhibits. In an article summarizing the hearings for a national

audience, Holman opened with the sad story of witness Levi Stewart. Stewart, a tenant, was $700 in debt after decades of hard work. His wife wore tattered clothes. Their children lacked shoes. Then Holman explained why the commission chose this region "west of the Mississippi River and south of the Kansas line" to investigate. Levi Stewart represented a specific new development. Recently in the Southwest there had developed a "submerged class so low in the economic scale that they have no fixed abodes, and roam from farm to farm. . . . They are the country brethren of the casual workers . . . pinned below an industrial structure." Most importantly, they were white. "Maps and charts were displayed," Holman continued, "to show that in this territory the problem of tenure is almost wholly a white man's problem."[63]

Indeed, it was the whiteness of this population that so alarmed concerned observers. References to the "negro tenant" certainly appeared in some testimonies, but the commission encouraged a laser-sharp focus on the whites. Black tenancy and Black sharecropping were understood as long-standing problems of the South and confined to the river and former plantation districts of East Texas. Expert witnesses effectively tabled Black landlessness as timeless and preindustrial.[64] In contrast, an agrarian system turned industrial and an agricultural frontier vanished when good, well-watered lands grew cancerous with capitalists and captive white tenants. This tacit racial-economic model was foundational to reformers' conceptualization of Southwestern tenancy as a problem of modern capitalism. This was similar to the agricultural class relations of grower-dominated California, where the commission had held hearings the previous August. These white Southwestern tenants had been pushed to the bottom in lands that should have been theirs. They were the real Americans, after all. As Oscar Ameringer put it:

> I would arouse these people, so much lower in the scale of life than New Orleans dock wallopers, black and white. . . . These people were not wops or bohunks. . . . They were Americans. . . . They were Scotch, Irish, Scotch-Irish, and English with only a few exceptions. They were more American than the population of any present-day New England town. They were Washington's ragged, starving, shivering army at Valley Forge. . . . Pushed out of Tidewater Virginia, and out of the fertile Piedmont, and out of the river valleys, into the hills and mountains. . . . They had followed on the heels of the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles, like the stragglers of routed armies.[65]

Because of the Dallas location, the hearings mainly featured Texas residents, but the commission invited three participants from Oklahoma. Charles Holman clearly stacked the small selection in favor of radical voices;

no representative from Oklahoma spoke on behalf of landowners, creditors, or academics. The most prominent figure was Patrick S. Nagle, a well-known Socialist lawyer, newspaper editor, and associate of Oscar Ameringer. Also on the Oklahoma roster was W. L. Thurman, a minister and Socialist lecturer, and E. J. Giddings, the general counsel of a farmers' protective association who so fiercely denounced usurious banking and merchant practices that he might have well been a Socialist.

Nagle's testimony was the lengthiest of the three. The commission had asked him to prepare statements on six general topics: "the lease contract in Oklahoma, the machinery of eviction, the Renters' Union, the schools, the history of farming in Oklahoma, and the movement from the country to city." Nagle laced his answers with consistent denunciations of the systemic control of rural people by town-based elites and their biased "little" courts. "In those electric light towns are grouped approximately 100 parasites of the first degree," Nagle exclaimed. "This means that every 30 farmers must keep 1 parasite in affluence. They must furnish him with a first-class house, with servants and all the trappings of middle-class fashionable life. These parasites are interlocked. . . . Under the existing order [the tenant] survives as a peon and a serf."[66] Nagle read aloud, word for word, the Renters' Union's entire platform and threw in the farm and land proposals of the Oklahoma Socialist Party for good measure.

Nagle also provided details specific to Oklahoma. He discussed the divergent histories of the Oklahoma Territory in the West and the Indian Territory in the East, which resulted in a high number of mortgaged farms in the western part of the state and a shockingly elevated rate of tenancy in the eastern part of the state. He did not dwell on the Indigenous history of Oklahoma except to point out that the lands opened from Comanche, Apache, Wichita, and Kiowa reservations passed to settlers under Homestead Act arrangements, while Indian Territory lands did not. Nagle, in other words, kept Indians abstract and distant, at arm's length. But that did not mean he had failed to absorb the Socialist analysis of conquest. He too let loose a muscular, rhetorical pivot from conquest to capitalism:

> Heretofore it has been impossible to enslave the American producing farmer for the same reason that it was impossible to enslave the Indian. He escaped to the woods. But the public domain is exhausted. . . . The farmer, single-handed and alone, forced his way across a wilderness from the Atlantic to the Pacific, contending not only with the forces of nature, but with wild beasts and wilder men. He overcame every obstacle and conquered every foe until he met the trust. . . . The farmer will not worship the trust; he will fight again.[67]

Nagle's abstract deflection of empire was imperial, to be sure, but devoid of overt racist disdain. The testimonies of the two additional Oklahomans, however, reeked of it. This suggests that experienced Socialist writers and publishers like Nagle and Ameringer may have found deflection more diplomatic, maybe even more kindly, than a direct confrontation with the Indian presence in the state. Oklahoma legal advocate E. J. Giddings, for example, offered an authoritative account of the power differentials between bankers and tenant farmers. He listed the outrageous interest rates and outlined the underdeveloped field of usury law. But Giddings also vented intense frustration that so far in the proceedings no one had yet addressed the most serious problem of all: "that is with regard to Indian land conditions in the east side of the State where the tenant system is more aggravated by 100 percent than on the west side."[68]

Giddings offered a far more detailed account of recent Indian policy and the rise of land graft, and his history, unlike Nagle's, featured the dominant assimilationist and racist beliefs of the state's white majority. "Oklahoma Territory, the west side of the state, had an organized government . . . [but] the Indian Territory on the east side of the state was absolutely disorganized . . . and it devolved upon the lawmakers to bring order out of chaos." The basic problem was that Indians still owned too much land, Giddings said; the speculators worked in league with the chiefs, and the white tenants were the victims. "The Indian should be permitted to sell his land and made to shift for himself like the average American citizen must do. . . . If the Government may control monopoly, regulate it in any industry, it ought to be able to control and regulate monopoly of the land."[69] Unlike the Socialist writers, who avoided a direct attack on existing Indians and thereby camouflaged their critique of land "monopoly," Giddings exhibited no such restraint. In the same breath he condemned monopolist Indians and speculative capitalists, who worked in league together.

Socialist lecturer and minister W. L. Thurman, although far less prominent and published than Nagle, probably spoke for more Socialists than did either Nagle or Ameringer. Like Giddings, he offered a far more detailed account of recent land and Indian policy, affirming that the speculators, grafters, and Indian leaseholders possessed everything. "One firm of lawyers in Ardmore," he asserted, "are controlling about 1,500 farms, and they have about 1,500 families renting under them." But Thurman also blamed rural poverty, in large part, on Indigenous inferiority:

> [There] are the old log shacks that were built from 30 to 40 years ago by the Indians . . . very poorly constructed . . . and the most of them are in wretched condition. . . . These Indian shacks are leaky and rotting down . . . and yet

> families are living in them. . . . It is in these log pens and rawhide houses that thousands of our Oklahoma tenant families live. They are helpless, hopeless, industrious slaves, living in degrading poverty.[70]

According to Thurman, Native people's precivilized habits had debased the white family.

The commission's hearings nationalized a new discourse about a region of the country that few Americans had considered. But it channeled imperialism into capitalism as effectively as Socialist rhetoric. The commission raised topics specific to Oklahoma and offered a platform for Oklahoma dissenters. But it ultimately enveloped the state's unique set of ongoing colonial relationships into a broader range of concerns about the end of the agricultural frontier, the industrial structure of modern tenancy, and the emergence of a permanent white underclass. In this national forum, Oklahoma was an extension of Texas, and California was the endgame for everyone.[71]

That leftists and radicals understood imperialism as capitalism may sound banal and unsurprising, certainly in world-comparative terms. But what is significant for US history is the location, timing, and function of these ideas. The Oklahoma Socialist analysis emerged not from looking at European activities in Africa and Asia, or at America's own acquisitions in the Caribbean and the Pacific after 1898.[72] It emerged from inside the messy center of the continental homeland, where after 1898 the United States also extinguished the final sovereign remains of Indian Territory. White citizens and American political parties flooded in to fulfill the promises of national incorporation. They could not entomb Native people entirely inside the past because they found themselves face to face with a great deal of Indian landownership as well as many new varieties of Indigenous victimhood.

Most white Oklahomans embraced assimilationist and racist views of Indians, and a few continued to nurture exterminationist ones. But these actors are not my focus because their story does not yank the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. It is true that the situation in Oklahoma was utterly distinct. Varieties of white rural socialism developed in the other settler states, but not at comparable moments and certainly not under similar circumstances. Never in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or South Africa did landless and impoverished white farm tenants feel themselves crushed by a cabal of capitalists and Natives. Yet because of Oklahoma's singularity, and its position as the last undigested bite of the American agrarian frontier, its history is representative. Its Socialist movement contained the overlapping currents of colonialism and modern political reform.

Left-leaning Americans digested empire with a critique of capitalism and an evaluation of the industrial class relations of modern agriculture. When the Oklahoma Socialists emphasized class conflict and inequality within the white settler state, they opened up a bold new story in political economy and solidified their activist bona fides. Put aside that earlier history, they said; let's go after the real bastards now. Twentieth-century reform intersected with Indigenous dispossession. It helped make sense of it and provided an enduring liberal cloak for obscuring it.

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Notes

1. Charles W. Holman, "Indian Landlords of Oklahoma," *Farm and Ranch*, January 27, 1912, 4.

2. Holman, "Indian Landlords," 4.

3. Holman, "Indian Landlords," 5; Charles W. Holman, "Coveting Thy Neighbor's Land," *Farm and Ranch*, February 3, 1912, 5–6.

4. Holman, "Coveting Thy Neighbor's Land," 6.

5. Charles W. Holman, "The Tenantry of the Southwest: An Interpretation of the Dallas Hearing on the Land Question of the United States Commission on Industrial Relations," *The Survey*, April 17, 1915; "The Land Question in the Southwest," US Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony*, Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, vols. 9–10.

6. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 234–35, 257–58. The first documented use of "Lo" in reference to the American Indian comes from Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" (1733). Over time, American writers like Horace Greeley used "Lo" to stand for people they viewed as savages, either noble or barbarous. Surprisingly, there is little scholarship on such a widespread and derogatory term. See Hannah Muhlfelder, "Notes on the Use of 'Lo'," 2025, unpublished paper in possession of author.

7. See Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*; Berthrong, *The Cheyenne and Arapaho Ordeal*; Miner, *The Corporation and the Indian*; Hoxie, *A Final Promise*; Prucha, *The Great Father*; Bays, *Townsite Settlement*; McDonnell, *Dispossession*; Purdue, *Nations Remembered*; Clark, *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*; Carter, *The Dawes Commission*; Zissu, *Blood Matters*; Hagan, *Taking Indian Lands*; Bloom, "An American Tragedy of the Commons"; Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Stremlau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family*; Ellinghaus, *Blood Will Tell*; Frymer, *Building an American Empire*; Saunt, *Unworthy Republic*; and Ramage, "Phoenix on Fire."

8. See Meredith, "Oscar Ameringer"; Meredith, "A History of the Socialist Party"; Burbank, "Agrarian Radicals and Their Opponents"; Burbank, "The Disruption and Decline"; Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red*; Rosen, "Peasant Socialism in America?"; Garin Burbank, "Agrarian Socialism"; Green, "Tenant Farmer Discontent"; Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*; Rosen, "Socialism in Oklahoma"; Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma*; Thompson, *Closing the Frontier*; Miller,

Oklahoma Populism; Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies*; Sellars, "With Folded Arms?"; Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*; and Bissett, "Socialism From the Bottom Up."

9. The material for this historical sketch on Oklahoma is drawn from the other works cited as well as Gittinger, *The Formation of the State of Oklahoma*; Foreman, *A History of Oklahoma*; Rister, *Land Hunger*; Gibson, *Oklahoma*; Morgan and Morgan, *Oklahoma*; Scales and Goble, *Oklahoma Politics*; Burton, *Indian Territory*; and Goins and Goble, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma*.

10. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier."

11. *Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting*, 43.

12. Strickland, *The Indians in Oklahoma*; Blackman, *Oklahoma's Indian New Deal*.

13. Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma*.

14. Blackman, *Oklahoma's Indian New Deal*. Also see Debo, *And Still the Waters Run.*

15. Bizzell, *Farm Tenantry in the United States*; John H. Southern, "Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma" (Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 239, 1939); Testimony and Tables of Patrick S. Nagle, "The Land Question in the Southwest," US Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony*, Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, vol. 10, 9072–73.

16. See, for example, Wickett, *Contested Territory*; Sturm, *Blood Politics*; Lynn-Sherow, *Red Earth*; Miles, *Ties that Bind*; Miles and Holland, *Crossing Waters*; Yarbrough, *Race and the Cherokee Nation*; Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory*; Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Boxell, "Red Soil, White Oil"; Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While*; Boxell, "From Native Sovereignty to an Oilman's State"; and Gayle, *We Refuse to Forget*.

17. Simmons, "Colorblind Proletarian Brotherhood."

18. "Indian Lands," *Oklahoma Pioneer,* January 14, 1911.

19. US Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Population of Oklahoma and Indian Territory*, 1907.

20. See Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Stremlau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family*; and Meredith, "Native Response."

21. Simmons, "Colorblind Proletarian Brotherhood."

22. "Give Us Socialism or We Starve," *The New Century*, September 27, 1912.

23. This biographical sketch is drawn from Miller, *From Prairie to Prison*.

24. O'Hare, "The Oklahoma Vote."

25. O'Hare, "The Land of Graft."

26. O'Hare, "The Land of Graft," 598–99.

27. O'Hare, "The Land of Graft," 600–602.

28. Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, ix.

29. O'Hare, "The Land of Graft," 599.

30. O'Hare, "The Land of Graft," 602–4.

31. O'Hare, "The Land of Graft," 600–604.

32. This biographical sketch is drawn from Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*; Green, "Introduction to the New Edition," xvii–xlviii; and materials from the Oscar and Freda Ameringer Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

33. Green, "Introduction to the New Edition," xxiii.

34. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 222–23.

35. Ameringer's pamphlets include *Socialism: What It Is and How to Get It* (Political Action Company, 1911); *Life and Deeds of Uncle Sam: A Little History for Big Children* (Political Action Company, 1912); *Socialism for the Farmer Who Owns the Farm* (National Rip-Saw Publishing Company, 1912); and *Communism, Socialism, and the Church* (Milwaukee Social-Democratic Publishing Company, 1913). Copies of these pamphlets are contained in the John Dunning Political Collection (hereafter JDPC), Box 3, Folder 35, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

36. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 95.

37. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 229–31.

38. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 232.

39. Marti, "Answering the Agrarian Question."

40. "Attention Renters," *Oklahoma Pioneer*, Februrary 2, 1910. Also see "Declaration of Principles, Oklahoma Renter's Union," Bureau of Government Research Collection, Box 15, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman.

41. "State Platform of Socialist Party of Oklahoma," *Oklahoma Pioneer*, January 12, 1910. Also see "State Platform of Socialist Party of Oklahoma," Bureau of Government Research Collection, Box 15, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman.

42. Ameringer, *Socialism for the Farmer*, 28 (capitalization in original), JDPC.

43. Many Oklahoma Populists made similar arguments in the 1890s and expressed alliance with the Knights of Labor and Eugene Debs's American Railway Union. See Miller, *Oklahoma Populism.*

44. Ameringer, *Socialism for the Farmer*, 29, JDPC.

45. Green, "Introduction to the New Edition," xxxv.

46. See Harmon, "American Indians," and Denson, *Demanding the Cherokee Nation*.

47. Ameringer, *Socialism for the Farmer*, 29, JDPC; "Oklahoma State Platform of the Socialist Party," *Grant County Socialist*, October 19, 1912; Socialist Party of Oklahoma, "Campaign and Platform Book, 1916," David A. Stovall Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

48. Blackman, *Oklahoma's Indian New Deal*. Also see Debo, *And Still the Waters Run.*

49. "Oklahoma State Platform of the Socialist Party"; "Campaign and Platform Book, 1916."

50. "State Happenings," *American Social Democrat*, December 22, 1910.

51. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 167.

52. "Land Swindlers," *Oklahoma Pioneer*, April 6, 1910.

53. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 234–35.

54. For example, see "Indian Lands," *Oklahoma Pioneer*, January 14, 1911; "Carter's Indian Land Bills," *The New Century*, April 12, 1912; "Indian Suits," *Grant County Socialist*, July 27, 1912; "From Montana," *The Sledge Hammer*, February 12, 1914; "His Master's Voice," *The Sledge Hammer*, February 12, 1914; "Prosecute Indian Guardians," *The Sledge Hammer*, May 24, 1914; "Big Indian Allotment Frauds," *The Sledge Hammer*, June 11, 1914; "Osage Tribe Reject Leases," *The Sledge Hammer*, June 23, 1914; "Slandering the State," *The Tenant Farmer*, August 1, 1915; "The De-Mock-Rot Chief," *Otter Valley Socialist*, April 12, 1916.

55. "Holt on the Owen-Carter Steal," *The New Century*, April 12, 1912; "The Oklahoma Land?," *The New Century*, March 28, 1913.

56. See Harmon, *Rich Indians*.

57. "The Pioneer Farmer," *Grant County Socialist*, December 7, 1912.

58. "Two Brothers and Sixteen Sticks of Dynamite: The Bombing of the L.A. Times," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 2024.

59. Adams Jr., *Age of Industrial Violence*, 227.

60. The California hearings are included in volumes 5 and 6, US Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony*, Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916. Also see Carleton H. Parker, "The Wheatland Riot and What Lay Back of It," *The Survey*, March 21, 1914.

61. Testimony of Charles W. Holman, "The Land Question in the Southwest," US Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony*, Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, vol. 10, 8952.

62. Holman, "The Land Question," 8952–54.

63. Holman, "The Tenantry of the Southwest," 62–63.

64. "The Land Question in the Southwest," US Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony*, Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, vols. 9–10.

65. Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 233–34.

66. Testimony of Patrick S. Nagle, "The Land Question in the Southwest," 9060, 9070, 9074–75. Also see Cassity Jr., "The Political Career of Patrick S. Nagle," 48–67.

67. Testimony of Patrick S. Nagle, "The Land Question in the Southwest," 9075–76.

68. Testimony of E. J. Giddings, "The Land Question in the Southwest," US Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony,* Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, vol. 10, 9099.

69. Testimony of E. J. Giddings, "The Land Question in the Southwest," 9100.

70. Testimony of W. L. Thurman, "The Land Question in the Southwest," US Senate, Commission on Industrial Relations, *Industrial Relations: Final Report and Testimony*, Senate Document No. 415, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, vol. 10, 9159.

71. Texas had a very active Socialist Party in this era as well, even though it never reached Oklahoma's numbers. See Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, and Green, "Tenant Farmer Discontent."

72. Many Socialists initially supported the cause of Cuban freedom, but those who did quickly adopted a more critical analysis after 1899. See Quint, "American Socialists."

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