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# Jamelle Bouie

OPINION

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Oliver Anthony. @radiowv, via YouTube

You may have heard about Oliver Anthony, a Virginia-based folk singer who has become a conservative folk hero on account of his populist anthem, “Rich Men North of Richmond.”

But Anthony's populism is, [as Eric Levitz details for New York magazine](#), decidedly right-wing.

Resentment of inequality and the precariousness of working-class life pervades the rest of the song too. But Anthony persistently channels these resentments away from the bosses and shareholders who profited off his ill-compensated labor and onto targets sanctioned by conservative orthodoxy: tax-hiking politicians, pedophilic cabals, and obese welfare moochers.

I don't have any particular interest in either Anthony or the song in question (although Levitz's piece is good and you should read it). But as an almost lifelong Virginian myself, I do think it is interesting that this musical spokesman for conservative populism comes from Farmville, Va. — a town of historical significance in the fight for civil rights — which is a little more than an hour west of Petersburg, once the political home of the "Readjuster" movement of the late 19th century.

One of the most common misconceptions about Jim Crow is that it came directly out of the defeat of Reconstruction. But Jim Crow — a system of white supremacist class rule — wasn't a response to Reconstruction as much as it was a response to the aftermath of Reconstruction, when biracial coalitions of laboring men and their allies continued to vie for power and influence throughout the states of the former Confederacy.

In Virginia, this took the form of the Readjuster movement, named for its call to partially repudiate, or "readjust," the state's debt in order to maintain the social services, and, crucially, the public schools, that conservative elites hoped to dismantle in the name of "economy, retrenchment and self sacrifice."

An independent coalition of (mostly) Black Republicans and white Democrats led by the former Confederate general and railroad magnate William Mahone, [the Readjusters](#) governed Virginia from 1879 to 1883, electing most of the state's legislature as well as a majority of its delegation to Congress. The Readjusters were, the historian Jane Dailey writes in "[Before Jim Crow](#): The

Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia,” “the most successful interracial political alliance in the postemancipation South.”

A Black-majority party, the Readjusters legitimated and promoted African American citizenship and political power by supporting black suffrage, office-holding, and jury service. To a degree previously unseen in Virginia and unmatched elsewhere in the nineteenth-century South, the Readjusters became an institutional force for the protection and advancement of Black rights and interests.

With their support for policies that favored debtors over creditors and working men over the wealthy, the Readjusters and other similar independent parties represented an effort to find threads of “common interest that emphasized class status and civil rights and downplayed race.”

As fraught and tenuous as it was, the Readjuster movement still represents a moment of possibility in the history of the American South — one that would be eclipsed by a relentless “[counterrevolution of property](#)” that, in its success, cemented relations of domination, across lines of race and class, for most of the next century.

Compared with some of the signature moments of Virginia history — whether the settlement of Jamestown or Bacon’s Rebellion or the Battle of Yorktown or the surrender at Appomattox — the rise and fall of the Readjusters is obscure, if not outright unknown to everyone other than those with a serious interest in the American past.

For my part, I can’t help but think there’s something ironic about the fact that, despite sitting close to this history, the latest populist voice to come out of the commonwealth has chosen, in the end, to give comfort to those with the boot on his neck and scorn to those who might try to help lift it.