

Populism - A Brief Introduction to a Baffling Notion

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"Populism in the sense that these pseudointellectuals use it carries overtones of anti one religion or another. They don't dare charge me with that, so they just say 'populism' - it's a sort of highbrow smear."

George C. Wallace¹

Of all -isms in the vocabulary of political science, "populism" is probably the most slippery. Yet - if not for the very same reason - it remains appealing both as a term of confession and as a term of abuse. Thus no matter how slippery and useless the notion might be, we seem to be stuck with it. This is not least true with regard to American politics. For the last century the term has been used in connection with all kinds of political phenomena, and the meaning of the notion certainly hasn't become clearer by this frequent use. Today progressive farmers' organizations of the Midwest share the term with "radical right" organizations such as "Liberty Lobby."

"Populism" was introduced to the American political vocabulary as a self-descriptive term used by the People's Party in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The People's Party united a number of radical political movements, especially among farmers in the Midwest and the South, in a third-party effort that might have become a serious challenge to the established party system. The Populist movement was first of all a response to the severe social and economic problems that many farmers faced, especially after the Civil War. Among these problems were financial ones caused by the reintroduction of gold as the only monetary standard. This increased the value of the dollar, caused interest rates to go up, and made the prices on farm commodities fall. Thus, the demand for a monetary reform became an issue of overall importance to many farmers. The railroads were another vital problem. As a "lifeline," especially to the western states, the railroad companies could treat the farmers pretty much as they pleased. And so they did. Freight charges were often four times as high as the rates charged in the East for similar distances. Small quantities of grain were refused, or had

to wait until the market was over-supplied and prices started to fall, etc. Furthermore, in many western states the railroad corporations had sufficient political and economic power to control that their interests weren't threatened by the state legislatures.

In response to their numerous problems, farmers united in various "alliances," and later, when the necessity for direct political action became evident, in a political party - the People's Party.² The party platform - the so-called Omaha-platform - declared: "We seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of 'the plain people' with whose class it originated."³ It also spoke of "the producing class" and stated that "the interests of rural and civic labor are the same; their enemies are identical."⁴ The Omaha platform provided a plan for regulation of the supply of agricultural products - "the Subtreasury Plan."⁵ It proposed the reintroduction of "bi-metallism," a graduated income tax, state-owned railroads, telegraph and telephone systems, government established banks, etc. Furthermore, the populists demanded shorter working hours in the industry, the banning of Pinkerton strike-breakers, restriction of immigrant labor, direct election of US senators, secret ballots, and the adoption of the Initiative and Referendum.

Although the Populist movement was a short-lived phenomenon, it has a lasting impact on American politics. The reform impulse as well as many of the actual political issues introduced by the movement were adopted by the Progressives at the beginning of this century, and have been taken up later as well. Thus the idea of a "populist tradition" in American politics has become widely accepted. The character and bias of this tradition, however, have become one of the most controversial issues in twentieth-century American history.

The Populist movement went into American historiography with a rather sympathetic image. John D. Hicks, whose study "the Populist Revolt"⁶ for many years was considered the most authoritative work on the subject, viewed the populist movement as a progressive political phenomenon with visions far ahead of its time. It was not until the early fifties that this favorable view of populism was seriously challenged. Inspired by newly emerged theories of "the authoritarian personality," mass society, etc., historians and sociologists such as Richard Hofstadter, Seymour M. Lipset, Talcott Parsons, and Edward Shils now turned their attention towards the political and cultural milieu that populism emerged from rather than the actual political issues. This led to a number of critical interpretations that more or less presented the Populist movement as a political neurosis promoted by the fear of being

left behind by industrialization. Most of these scholars were themselves more or less traumatized by McCarthyism and the popular support that McCarthy apparently enjoyed. Richard Hofstadter, who wrote the perhaps most influential work on populism, "The Age of Reform," frankly admitted this in the introduction to the book: "I do not wish to deny or minimize, my own interest has been drawn to that side of Populism and Progressivism - particularly of Populism - which seems very strongly to foreshadow some aspects of the cranky pseudoconservatism of our time."⁷ Hofstadter saw a continuity from the Populist movement to McCarthyism - a Populist-Progressive tradition that had "turned sour along the way."⁸ The same view was expressed by Edward Shils (among others), who in "The Torment of Secrecy" called McCarthy "the heir of La Follette."⁹ McCarthy was not just viewed as an offspring from the Populist tradition, but also as a natural consequence. What he had brought out in the open had apparently been latent features of populism all along. Or as Peter Viereck expressed it: "Beneath the sane economic demands of the populists of 1880-1900 seethed a mania for xenophobia, Jew-baiting, intellectual-baiting, and thoughtcontrolling lynch-spirit."¹⁰ In many of the critical interpretations it was also argued that the ideological continuity was matched by a continuity in the social base from the populist movement to McCarthyism.

The views of McCarthyism presented by Hofstadter, Shils, Viereck, and others have of course provoked strong reactions and have been challenged by more favorable views. C. Vann Woodward's essay, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual" points out the remarkably tolerant attitude that characterized the populist's relations to the black population.¹¹ In *The Populist Response to Industrial America* by Norman Pollack, Populism is viewed as a progressive social movement that with the necessary political power could have changed American society in a socialist direction.¹² Perhaps the most weighty arguments against the views presented by Hofstadter et al. are found in Michael Paul Rogin's *The Intellectuals and McCarthy*.¹³ Through a number of case studies, Rogin refutes the thesis of continuity in the social base from the Populist movement to McCarthyism. He points out that McCarthy didn't have his ideological offspring in the populist tradition, but rather in traditional conservatism. Rogin does admit, though, that McCarthy used "populist rhetoric," but points out that this is a common feature of American culture, irrespective of political opinion. Further, he points out that the nativist and racist views that have been ascribed to the populists were a general phenomenon - especially in that part of the

population from which the Populist movement gained its support – but that these views actually were less prominent among populists than among the population as a whole.

The main assumption behind the idea of "the populist tradition" is that a continuity between various political phenomena has existed since the populist movement of the late nineteenth century. But what constitutes this continuity? An ideological core? Certain political issues? A specific political style? Questions such as these might pose other more general questions about the very meaning of the term "populism," but these more general questions have apparently never been of great interest to American scholars. Although the Populist movement has been the subject for a large number of studies, only a few general studies on "populism" have been published so far. The following is meant as a brief introduction to some of the general problems concerning the notion of "populism" as well as to some of the methods proposed so far in dealing with these problems.

Differences in the interpretation of the term "Populism" as well as the lenient way in which it is often being used are first of all due to the absence of an adequate definition. Demarcation seems almost impossible. Defining the concept in order to cover only a reasonable number of political phenomena, previously labeled "populist," necessitates formulations so vague that the definition would have no practical applicability. On the other hand, a concise definition would necessarily be too narrow for most of the actual political phenomena labeled as "populist." None of these possibilities seems to take us much further.

However, some attempts have been made to find an adequate definition. One of the few general publications dealing with the concept of populism, *Populism its Meanings and National Characteristics*, edited by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner,¹⁴ is based on a conference on the subject, "To Define Populism." All proposals put forward on this conference seem to suffer from one of the two shortcomings mentioned above. To give a few examples: "Populism proclaims that the will of the people as such is supreme over every other standard."¹⁵ "Any creed or movement based on the following major premises: Virtue resides in the simplest people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions."¹⁶ "The belief that the majority opinion is checked by an elitist minority."¹⁷

While these three definitions are very general, the following suggested definitions are very narrow: "The socialism which (emerges) in backward peasant countries facing the problems of modernization."¹⁸ "A political movement which enjoys the support of the mass of the urban

working class and/or peasantry but which does not result from the autonomous organizational power of either of these two sectors.”¹⁹

Since most of the proposed definitions only seem to add to the confusion as to the concept of Populism, one might start out with something less than an all-embracing definition. In her book, *Populism*, Margaret Canovan has tried to avoid the problems of finding an adequate definition by using a descriptive typology.²⁰ By separating into various types of Populism, it is possible to establish a clear distinction between the individual phenomena and then focus on possible connections and overlaps. Margaret Canovan has suggested seven different "types" divided into two major categories:

Agrarian Populism

1. Farmers' radicalism (e.g., the U.S. People's Party)
2. Peasant movements (e.g., the East European Green Rising)
3. Intellectual agrarian socialism (e.g., the Narodniki in Russia)

Political Populism

4. Populist dictatorship (e.g., Peron)
5. Populist democracy (i.e., calls for referendums and "participation")
6. Reactionary populism (e.g., George Wallace and his followers)
7. Politicians' populism (e.g., broad, nonideological coalition-building that draws on the unificatory appeal of "the people")²¹

The above categories are analytical constructs and none of them will probably cover actual political phenomena entirely. While these might be close to one category, they may well overlap several categories – though not all. An understandable objection to Margaret Canovan's typology would of course be that it is arbitrary. In principle an infinite number of classifications of this kind could be made. Although the typology doesn't bring us any closer to an explanation of the notion of populism – that is, if there is anything to explain – it does provide some clarification regarding the nature of some of the political phenomena usually referred to as "populist."

Most attempts to define "populism" have been based on the assumption that different kinds of populism are varieties of the same kind of thing. Thus the proposed definitions have tried to strike a central core typical of all populist phenomena. But it might be that such a core doesn't exist – that populism is not a specific ideology consisting of a number of logically interrelated elements. For further explorations into the nature of "populism" then, it might be more fruitful to follow Peter

Wiles' suggestion and regard populism as "A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine."²² Peter Wiles has suggested an approach that isolates a number of populist elements that form a syndrome rather than a unity. These elements can be combined in a variety of ways, and can also be detached and recombined. To mention a few American examples: The Populist movement was among other things characterized by a combination of "farmers' radicalism" and "populist democracy" (e.g., the use of popular initiatives and referendums). "Populist democracy" was taken up by the Progressives - "farmer's radicalism" was not. On the other hand, "farmer's radicalism" was taken up by Huey Long, but in his instance "populist democracy" was replaced by "charismatic leadership."

Although no central core unites all instances of populism, there are at least a few elements that in some form seem to provide a common feature: appraisal of - and appeal to "the people," and anti-elitism. Unfortunately both can take a considerable number of forms. The notion of the people can refer to the peasants, the workers, the entire nation or just anyone except "the people's enemies." In the same way, the tactical use of the notion of "the people" stretches from the reconciliatory accentuation of common national interests without regard to class distinctions and political divergences, over the celebration of "the common man" to a directly anti-elitists usage where "the People" represents one side in a social dualism (e.g., "The People Vs. the Plutocrats").

The other mutual element, anti-elitism, is just as vague and ambiguous as the notion of "the people." It ranges from the general antagonisms towards professional politicians, intellectuals, big finance, big business, etc., to antagonisms towards personified conspiratorial power-elites (e.g., "Illuminati," "the New Orleans Ring" and "the Bilderbergers.")

As another aspect of anti-elitism, one often finds what might be called "the worship of the Little Man" - the admiration of "the Little Man's" quiet heroism, his common sense and his uncorrupted nature. To politicians the concept has the obvious advantage that it doesn't require any class definition. The little man can as well be a small manufacturer as a worker. He is only defined in his antagonism towards the elite. In the same manner as the concept of "the Little Man" can unite supporters in their antagonism towards the elite it can also legitimize the populist leader. As a spokesman for all "little men" his political leadership almost achieves the dimensions of a direct democracy.

If we leave the more general problems concerning the meaning of

"populism" for now, and turn our attention towards "the populist tradition" in American politics, we find an illustrative example of how widely differently it can be used by comparing George C. Wallace and Jimmy Carter - two politicians who have both been associated with the notion of "populism."

When Jimmy Carter during his election-campaign was asked whether he was a liberal or a conservative, he evaded the question by describing himself as a "populist."²³ As a former governor in Georgia, Carter could give some justification to his claim on the southern populist tradition (he even had an uncle named after the populist leader Tom Watson). In his discharge of office, however, there wasn't much resemblance to the Populist movement. Where for his part George Wallace had largely increased government spending during his time as governor in Alabama, the balanced budget was almost a cardinal deed for Carter. The major justification for Carter's claim to the populist tradition was his status as an "outsider" in relation to the political establishment. Although nobody becomes President of the United States without great political ambitions, the support of a huge organization and solid financial backing, Carter managed to take advantage of the traditional mistrust of professional politicians, powerful intermediaries, etc., embodied in the populist tradition - indeed an obvious advantage in the wake of Watergate. Time after time he echoed the Jacksonian insistence on giving the government back to the people.

There seem to be two types of populist leader, i.e., "the charismatic leader" and "the representative citizen." While populist leaders such as William Jennings Bryan and Huey Long belong to the former category, Jimmy Carter belongs to the latter. Carter justified his mandate to speak on behalf of the people with his own social background, as well as with the fact that he had been elected President of the United States without being an "insider" of the political establishment. Carter clearly expressed this view in his Acceptance-speech at the National Democratic party convention in July, 1976: "... I derived my political support, my advice and my concern directly from people themselves, not from powerful intermediaries or representatives of special-interest groups."²⁴ Carter used a lot of energy to maintain his image as "the ordinary American." Time after time he stressed his provincial background, his experiences as an independent businessman and as a farmer ("We haven't had a farmer in the White House since Thomas Jefferson").²⁵ However, Carter never used his political mandate against any "powerful intermediaries." The faint echoes of radicalism in his rhetoric never resulted in any definite proposals for reform. Though it would probably

be unjust to label Carter a political demagogue, his populist confession was first of all an attempt not to be labeled as either liberal or conservative - an understandable wish, considering the "catch-all" nature of the American party-system. With reference to Margaret Canovan's typology, Carter's populism could be labeled as "politicians populism," i.e., a political technique rather than an ideology.

If Jimmy Carter labeled himself 'populist' to avoid being labeled as either liberal or conservative, George Wallace skillfully avoided using the term for the same reason. Instead he described himself as "a conservative who supports the little man."²⁶ Both his liberal and his conservative opponents, however, labeled him a "populist," though for opposite reasons. When liberals used the term in connection with Wallace they referred to a special kind of demagogic appeal that reveals a gap between the reactionary, authoritarian and chauvinistic views of "the people" and the progressive, tolerant views of a cosmopolitan elite. When conservative opponents accused Wallace of being a "populist," it was the welfare-liberalist George Wallace they criticized. James Ashbrook, chairman of the American Conservative Union, stated prior to the election in 1968: "True Conservatism cannot be served by George Wallace. At heart his is a populist with strong tendencies in the direction of a collectivist welfare state ..."²⁷ Similar statements were made by prominent conservatives such as William F. Buckley and Barry Goldwater, who among other things called Wallace a "New Deal Populist."²⁸

Actually one could find some justification for both views. Wallace never missed a chance to tell his voters who they could blame for the rise in crime and violence, the social unrest, the enforced racial integration and the decline in national pride: the intellectuals. He had a special flair for getting at people's inferiority complexes by telling them with what contempt they were regarded by the intellectual elite. It was not only the intellectuals as a social group, but intellect as such he attacked. "The people" had an intuitive understanding of right and wrong, a common sense that the intellectuals had lost for some reason: "You are just one man and woman. You are just as good as he is. And in fact the average capdriver in this country, and the beautician, the steelworker, the rubber worker, the textile worker, knew instinctively when he saw him that Castro was a communist. So we may be better than they are ... And we are going to show them in November that the average American is sick and tired of all those over-educated ivory-tower folks with pointed heads looking down their noses at us."²⁹

The view of George Wallace as a "New Deal Populist" can also be justified. Long before he was elected governor of Alabama, he had

placed himself in the southern populist tradition. During his time in the state legislature he had proposed an increase in retirement pensions, better unemployment benefits for civil servants and free places for needy students. As governor he introduced the largest budget in the history of Alabama. He increased unemployment benefits, retirement pensions and medical aid. He gave all teachers a raise, built more than 20 new high-schools and trade-schools and introduced free textbooks. By the end of Wallace's time in office, Louisiana was the only state where more people received some kind of social benefit than in Alabama. As one politician remarked: "He did what all the Populists have always dreamed of doing."³⁰

When Wallace ran for president in 1968, his party-platform had many striking resemblances to the platform of the People's Party - especially on some of the social issues. The party-platform was only of minor importance to Wallace's election campaign, but as attempts were made by the Nixon camp to undercut his populist appeal - especially by promoting Spiro Agnew as an alternative - Wallace responded with an even stronger populist appeal. In several speeches he launched attacks on "Eastern money interests" and claimed that he had always supported the unions in Alabama.³¹ Thus Wallace, contrary to Carter, used "the populist tradition" to give profile to his candidature.

The conclusions that one can draw from the comparison of George Wallace and Jimmy Carter would rather be to apply it to the notion of "populism" than to either of the two. The fact that it can be used in such widely different ways as in the cases of Jimmy Carter and George Wallace, even within a narrow political context, clearly illustrates its lack of substance. The notion might imply a rhetoric tradition, a political style, a bias towards certain segments of the society, etc. It does not, however, imply a consistent ideology of rationally interrelated elements. In other words, various characteristics ascribed to specific "populist" phenomena are not united by a central core.

If the notion of "populism" had been conceived by social scientists, it would surely have been rejected as a poor and useless invention. Now that it does exist, however, the only thing to do seems to be to acknowledge that populist phenomena can be widely different sorts of things with just a few - if any - common features. Since the various elements of one populist phenomenon do not necessarily form a logical interrelationship, one should be very careful in drawing conclusions about other phenomena on the basis of a few comparative features. Maybe "populism" would not have been such a controversial issue in American history if a larger part of the discussion had been devoted to the meaning of the notion itself.

NOTES

1. John Synon, *George Wallace* (Kilmarnock, 1968), p. 123.
2. Peoples' Parties had been formed in Texas, Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina in 1891, and in July 1892 a national party was formed in Omaha.
3. John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Lincoln, 1961 (1931)), p. 441.
4. Ibid.
5. For further details on the "Subtreasury Plan", see Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York, 1976), Appendix B, p. 571.
6. Op.cit.
7. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955), p. 20.
8. Ibid.
9. Edward Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy* (London, 1956), p. 48.
10. Peter Viereck, *The Unadjusted Man* (Boston, 1956).
11. Vann C. Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," in Earl Latham, *The Meaning of McCarthyism* (Boston, 1966).
12. Norman Pollack, *The Populist response to Industrial America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).
13. Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).
14. (London, 1969).
15. Edward A. Shils, op.cit., p. 98.
16. Peter Wiles, "A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on populism," in Ionescu & Gellner, op.cit.
17. Harry Lazer, "British Populism: The Labour Party and the Common Market Parliamentary Debate," *Political Science Quarterly*, 91, No. 2 (1976), p. 259.
18. Andrzej Walicki, "Government and Opposition," in Ionescu & Gellner, op.cit.
19. Torcuato S. Di Tella, "Populism and Reform in Latin America," in C. Veliz (ed.): *Obstacles to Change in Latin America* (London, 1965), p. 47.
20. Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London, 1981).
21. Ibid., p. 13.
22. Peter Wiles, op.cit.
23. Canovan, op.cit., p. 269.
24. The Presidential Campaign 1976 (Washington, 1978), p. 271.
25. Ibid.
26. John Synon, op.cit. p. 82-83.
27. Quoted from Lipset, M. Seymour & Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Rightwing Politics in America 1790-1977* (Chicago, 1978 (1970)), p. 348.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 343.
31. Ibid., p. 348.