

Erik Åsard, *Janusansiktet; Amerikansk populism i historisk belysning*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Uppsala North American Studies Series 1 (Uppsala, 1994) Written in Swedish, with a 6-page summary in English.

All students of American history and politics will sooner or later have to face the notion of populism and ask themselves what it actually means. Is it an ideology? A social movement? A technique of direct democracy? Do all the phenomena that the term has been applied to have something in common? or is populism merely a rhetorical style which can be exploited by politicians of (almost) any observation?

It is Erik Åsard's intention with this book to bring us closer to an understanding of this slippery notion by the use of some historical examples. He has wisely abstained from adding yet another useless definition to the existing list.<sup>1</sup> Instead he adheres to the British political scientist Margaret Canovan's descriptive typology, which classifies seven types of populism in two major categories: "Agrarian Populisms" and "Political Populisms."<sup>2</sup> As the title of the book — *Janusansiktet*: (Janus: the dual face)— suggests, Åsard also acknowledges that populism defies a conventional liberal-conservative, left-right dichotomy. Instead he attempts to illustrate the positions of various populist phenomena in the political spectrum by the use of a diagram with "collectivism-individualism" as the horizontal axis and "pluralism-monism" (which first of all concerns the level of political tolerance) as the vertical axis.

Following an introduction to the concept itself, the book contains chapters on a number of individuals and organizations who have all been labeled— either admiringly or derogatorily—as "populists."<sup>3</sup> These include the populist movement of the late nineteenth century, Huey Long and Father Coughlin in the 1930s, and the reactionary brands of "populism" represented by George C. Wallace and, later, the New Right. Given the profound differences between these phenomena, it is tempting to write off populism as merely a rhetorical style, devoid of any ideological substance, but Åsard is not willing to leave it at that. He maintains that "regardless of the shifting guises assumed by our populists in this book, we have found that they have also had certain ideas and values in common." These ideas and values include:

- 1) An anti-attitude toward politics and its leading players that seems ultimately to be the product of a sort of social alienation.

1 For attempts to define populism, see Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds.), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969).

2 Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction Books, 1981).

3 George C. Wallace for one considered the term "a sort of highbrow smear" (John Synon, (Kilmarnock, 1968), p.123). Others such as New Right activists Kevin Phillips and Paul Weyrich have happily embraced it.

- 2) An aggressive political style, hostile to opponents, sometimes in tandem with both racism and theories of conspiracy.
- 3) An identification with common people,
- 4) A focus on a single over-riding cause.
- 5) A predilection for direct democracy. This includes both a mania for the "town-hall democracy" of a lost age and a severely critical view of the way representative democracy functions.
- 6) A romanticizing of a golden age.

The author is also willing to create an "archetypal American populist:" He—and it is striking how often he is male—is opposed to power in all its forms, but at the same time he is zealously eager to acquire as much of it as possible for himself. He seems to live in a constant atmosphere of uncertainty and unfulfilled expectations, but likes the outside world to see him as self-confident and resolute.<sup>4</sup>

With his emphasis on socio-psychological factors, alienation, anxieties and phobias, Åsard's view of populism is close to the one found among the so-called "consensus-historians"—a view which found its classic expression in Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*.<sup>5</sup>

Although all of the recent examples that Åsard uses in book are found on the right, it is worth noting that the notion of populism has also been ascribed to for instance contemporary progressive farmers' organizations in the Midwest and to the so-called Cornmunitarians on the Democratic left. Likewise, in his last book *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, Christopher Lasch expressed his belief in some sort of "populism" based on petty-bourgeois moral values as the only viable alternative to the greed and consumerism of a liberal tradition based upon the principle of unlimited economic expansion.<sup>6</sup> Åsard only mentions these alternative claims on the notion in a footnote. It is the alleged populism on the American right that remains his major concern.

Janusansiktet will not take the reader into uncharted waters, but it is an inspiring and well-written book which provides solid information about alleged "populists" in recent American history.

Niels Bjerre-Poulsen

Copenhagen Business School

<sup>4</sup> Åsard, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).