

Populism Is Not a Four-Letter Word

by Jim Price

Populism is a term frequently used in ways that foster confusion and controversy. It is sometimes thrown about in a disparaging manner, in conjunction with other words like demagoguery, to create fear about an idea or to discredit a political opponent. Establishment politicians and the corporate media often describe populists as those who use highly emotional rhetoric to present questionable ideas in an overly simplistic or opportunistic manner.

What is Populism?

Webster's Dictionary defines populism as, "an egalitarian political philosophy or movement that celebrates and promotes the views and interests of the common people."¹ At its core, populism involves a criticism of the establishment and an affirmation of the common people. It is a product of an antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites.²

Used in this context, the people can be grouped along racial, class, ethnic, or national lines. When employing the nation as a synonym for the people, all of the citizens within a particular national governmental jurisdiction are regarded as sovereign and belonging to the group. Thus, nationalism is sometimes an important value within a populist movement. This nationalistic sub-

theme can be inclusionary, as in a progressive democratic movement calling for the fair treatment of all people within a nation's boundaries -- including the most economically and politically vulnerable -- or exclusionary, as in a reactionary movement reflecting racially, culturally bigoted or nativist, anti-immigrant sentiments.³

The elites referred to by populists include the dominant power structure's economic, political, cultural, military, and media establishment, who are asserted to be placing their interests and those of other select groups, sometimes including foreign nations and/or immigrants, above the interests of the people. This can include wealthy oligarchs and large corporations who control the economic and political levers of power, and frequently, even the government itself.

Populism can be paired with a number of political ideologies, such as fascism, liberalism and socialism which provide their own diverse and far-reaching ideas about societal change. For this reason, populism itself cannot be neatly positioned on just one spot along the left-right political spectrum. There have been and are currently both left-wing and right-wing populist leaders, parties, and movements.

Populism can evolve from a democratic movement into an authoritarian regime, but still not be elitist (Venezuela under Hugo Chavez). On the other hand, some authoritarian movements are distinctly elitist from the outset (Spain under Francisco Franco and Chile under Augusto Pinochet). With that said, populism can foster democracy by contributing to the mobilization of groups that have been excluded from the political process. Through the use of such electoral mechanisms as initiatives, referendums, recalls, and proportional voting, populists have also pursued direct democracy.

Forms of Populist Mobilization

Populists have adopted three forms of political mobilization: the populist leader, the populist party, and the populist social movement. They are not mutually exclusive so a populist leader can inspire a populist movement that might include a populist political party.⁴

The Populist Leader

The populist leader is the most widespread form of populist political mobilization. In this form, a charismatic individual attracts support based upon his/her own personality; claims a direct relationship with the people; communicates directly with the people; and presents her/himself as the voice of the people.

Historically, most populist leaders have been males. Many describe themselves as men of action, espousing bold steps and promoting common sense solutions to issues which are frequently presented as crises. They frequently express themselves in simple and sometimes unrefined language, such as representing the common man and placing an emphasis on their virility and manhood. Historically, female populist leaders have commonly stressed their roles as wives and mothers. Of late, some recently elected female populists in the U.S. Congress have refused to dampen their outspoken feminist critique. Oftentimes, populist leaders portray themselves as outsiders even though many come from highly educated, middle income or wealthy families with insider connections. Some have military backgrounds and/or can be characterized as strongmen. Keep in mind that no populist leader simultaneously exhibits all of these traits and that some populist leaders, such as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, may hardly exhibit any of them.⁵

Populist Political Parties

Populist political parties are a second form of populist mobilization. Populists have used political parties to elect their own representatives to power in order to move their agendas. At first, early European populist parties reflected a conservative pushback against centralized governmental agricultural policies that were seen as unfavorable to farmers. Beginning in the 1970s, right-wing populist parties also attacked elites for coddling communists, welfare recipients and immigrants. Since World War II, they have been particularly successful in gaining political power. Examples include Jean-Marie Le Pen's National

Front which began as an anti-tax party with questionable ties to fascists and Nazis and Mogens Glistrup's Progress Party, an anti-tax party in 1970s Denmark.

In the 1970s, Europe's New Left emerged from a number of social movements, particularly from the Green parties. Following the demise of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European communist bloc nations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several additional right-wing political parties burst onto the European scene. It was only then that populism became a "relevant political force in Europe" capable of significantly impacting mainstream politics.⁶

Populist Social Movements in the United States

Populist political parties frequently evolve out of populist social movements, the third form of populist political mobilization. These movements can be either left or right-wing in nature. One distinct difference between them is that left-wing populist social movements tend to target only wealthy and powerful economic and political elites, including establishment political leaders, oligarchs, large corporations, and the right-wing media. On the other hand, right-wing populist social movements not only target establishment, leftist politicians, government bureaucrats, and the left-wing media, but also vulnerable scapegoats including racial or religious minorities, poor people, and/or immigrants.

The first populist movement to appear in the United States was the economically progressive Agrarian Movement that thundered out of the Great Plains and Southern states in the 1880s and 90s. This movement was led by farmers protesting an unfair railroad rate structure imposed by northeastern

bankers and politicians. Although there were racist elements within the movement that prevented it from reaching its ultimate goals, the Agrarian Movement has been credited as constituting the largest democratic mass movement in American history.⁷

A number of other left-wing social movements have also elevated progressive populist ideas in the United States. In 1934, populist Louisiana Senator Huey Long introduced his "Share the Wealth" program in Congress which included a cap on family wealth at \$5 million and family income at \$1 million. Tax revenues from the program were to provide a home, an auto, a radio, guaranteed annual income, and an old age pension to every family in the United States. Long's "Share the Wealth" movement is credited with forcing the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration to adopt more progressive positions in presenting their New Deal programs.⁸

A similar progressive populist movement was initiated in 1934 in California by the muckraking writer Upton Sinclair. The "End Poverty in California" movement (EPIC) was a grassroots movement which coincided with Sinclair's gubernatorial campaign. Its proponents called for an extensive jobs program in which the unemployed would be given jobs working in state-seized idle factories and on farm lands where the owner had failed to pay property taxes, a progressive income tax, and pensions for the old, disabled, and widowed.⁹ Although Sinclair was unsuccessful in his bid for governor, the EPIC movement has also been credited with influencing President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs.

Following the 2008-09 financial crisis, the Occupy Wall Street movement challenged corporate politicians and Wall Street economic elites constituting the 1%. It can be argued that the Occupy movement laid a foundation for the 2016 progressive populist presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders, the ramifications of which are still resounding through the political culture of the Democratic Party.

Most major recent populist movements in the United States have been right-wing in nature. In 1968, the populist presidential campaign of Alabama Governor George Wallace, running on the American Independent Party ticket, and Republican Party candidate Richard Nixon's campaign references to the silent majority, the liberal elite, and the welfare state set in motion events leading to an anti-government, racist, classist, and militarily expansionist political culture in the United States which continued throughout the remainder of the 20th Century. In 1978, Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann led a successful populist anti-tax campaign in California resulting in the passage of a ballot initiative, Proposition 13, which placed statewide limits on property taxation.

In 1992, Texas billionaire Ross Perot's "United We Stand" presidential campaign combined a range of right-wing concerns, including the protection of gun rights and the total elimination of budget deficits, with his opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In 1996, Pat Buchanan ran as the Reform Party's presidential candidate on a distinctly anti-immigrant, anti-neoliberal globalization platform.

More recently, in reaction to President Barack Obama's deference to the free market and Wall Street in handling the 2008-09 financial crisis, the Tea Party movement emerged as an attack on neoliberalism from the far right. This anti-government and white supremacist influenced movement set the stage for Donald Trump's anti-establishment, anti-immigrant, anti-globalization, and pro-nationalism campaign resulting in his election in 2016 and the reframing of the Republican Party in his image.¹⁰

Populist Social Movements in Europe and Latin America

The Narodnichestvo Movement, emerging in the Russian Empire in the late 19th Century, is generally recognized as the first European populist social movement. It was a left-wing peasant movement, similar in nature to the Agrarian Movement occurring in the United States around the same time. In that movement, populist themes were used to characterize the Russian peasants as constituting that society's moral foundation.

The 21st Century has seen a rise in the number of European right-wing political movements in more prosperous European countries, including the Freedom Party in Austria and Marine Le Pen's National Front in France. In 2015, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage, was successful in obtaining passage of the "Brexit" referendum on behalf of the United Kingdom's "left-behinds", calling on the United Kingdom to opt out of membership in the European Union (EU). Since then, most of the European radical right populist parties have given voice to "Euroskepticism", anti-globalization and anti-immigration ideas.¹¹

With its tradition of democratic governance and free elections juxtaposed against high rates of social and economic inequality, Latin America has the world's most enduring and prevalent populist tradition.¹² Following the Great Depression through the 1960s, a first wave of Latin American populist regimes exercised power. They were led by such charismatic populist leaders as Getulio Vargas in Brazil, Juan Peron in Argentina, and Jose Maria Valasco Ibarra in Ecuador. These leaders emphasized "Americanismo" ideologies denouncing imperialism by colonial European nations and the United States.

A second wave of populist movements emerged in the 1990s. Such populist regimes as those of Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru broke from their predecessors by not pursuing anti-imperialist programs but, once in power, emphasized a neoliberal economic agenda.

The early 21st Century brought a new wave of leftist populist regimes coupling anti-imperialist themes with socialist domestic and foreign policies. These regimes were led by such charismatic populist leaders as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Their collective emphasis was on "bringing sovereignty back to the people."

Latin America is currently experiencing a right-wing populist turn in Brazil with the recent election of Jair Bolsonaro as its president. Bolsonaro has pledged to loosen Brazil's strict gun laws by allowing citizens to arm themselves to "fight crime." He is also promoting more development in the environmentally sensitive

Amazon basin by switching Brazil's policy from protecting the indigenous people living there to opening their lands for logging, mining and cattle grazing. Ecologists fear that this policy change will result in dramatic climatic shifts in global weather patterns. Finally, Bolsonaro has also pledged to pursue a right-wing foreign policy.

Populism, the Forgotten People and Capitalism

An examination of current left and right-wing populist movements worldwide reveals a number of common threads. First, these movements are being fueled by anger from large segments of people in predominantly rural areas who feel their plight has been ignored by their political establishments and that they have been left out of the economic rewards accruing to transnational corporations and wealthy urban elites benefitting from neoliberal globalization. The political and economic playing fields are seen by these excluded masses as rigged to benefit the privileged. The strong populist campaigns waged in the United States in 2016 by both Senator Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump reflect these sentiments. There is added pressure on establishment entities and institutions across the globe arising from the 2008-09 financial crisis and Islamist terrorist attacks. The pro-immigrant settlement policies of the European Union (EU), resulting from the displacement of refugees from war zones in both the Middle East and Africa as well as from climate change-driven droughts in those regions, has led to a "Eurocrisis" caused by increasing tensions between native-born citizens in many European countries and immigrants competing for

employment. The draconian economic austerity programs imposed upon Greece and Spain by the European Union, beginning at the turn of the 21st Century, are also signaling hard times for other European debtor nations. Finally, these "Euroskeptic" tensions can be seen in the opposition to the European Union in the United Kingdom and in Central and Eastern European countries which is leading to the EU's uncertain future.

These trends are indicators that a great many "forgotten people" worldwide are suffering economically from the effects of neoliberal globalization. The planetary damages from unsustainable natural resource extraction and depletion, coupled with the ecological impacts of global climate change, are compounding this problem. Given these trends, it is evident that the current emergence of both left and right-wing populist movements in many parts of the world reflects the societal failure of capitalism to deliver a just and environmentally sustainable economic system – which results in an unjust political system and an unsustainable ecological system.

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Notes

¹Webster's College Dictionary, 2005, New York: Random House, Inc.

²Margaret Canovan, 1981, *Populism* (1st Ed), New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.

³John B. Judis, 2018, *The Nationalist Revival: Trade, Immigration, and the Revolt Against Globalization*, New York: Columbia Global Reports.

⁴Canovan, 1981.

⁵Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁶Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017.

⁷Lawrence Goodwyn, 1978, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁸T. Harry Williams, 1969, *Huey Long*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁹Upton Sinclair, 1933, *I, Candidate for Governor, and How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future*, New York, Farrar & Rinehart.

¹⁰John B. Judis, 2016, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, New York: Columbia Global Reports.

¹¹Judis, 2016.

¹²Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017.

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