Populism

Populism is an ambiguous term because there has never been a specific program for something called populism, as there has been for communism and Nazism. It is thus perhaps better to concentrate on usage than to invent a history of a single ideology that does not exist. The most salient first use of the term populism and its cognates can be found in later nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia. The Russian peasant *Narodniki* of the 1860s and 1870s (“People-ism” would be an apt translation of their program of “Narodnichestvo” [*Народничество*]) supply a good beginning point. As Eric Hobsbawn has noted, the Narodnik program, which Marx’s very late work inclined toward, “believed that the Russian village community could provide the basis of a transition to socialism without prior disintegration through capitalist development” (“Introduction” to Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations,* 49-50). Marxists of the time and later opposed such a conflation of historical phases. But this mostly peasant and Slavophilic early populism in Russia is a telling precursor of later European and American groups who turned to notions of land, regional autonomy, and ethnic/racial bonds in the service of resistance to the deracinating effects of large-scale capitalism. Later populism was often also a reaction against the liberal nation-state’s need to manage capitalism by means of an increasingly powerful and centralized administrative apparatus. But the reaction took several quite distinct paths.

The most powerful form of European populism arose just before and, even more assertively, after WWI in Germany. Evolving from “back to the land” movements before the war, German and Scandinavian populism took root in the wake of Germany’s humiliating military defeat, subsequent inflation, and the effects of the Great Depression. Most commonly described as *“völkisch”* (popular) or *“Blut und Boden”* (blood and soil) in nature, this populism expressed itself in the immensely popular peasant novels of Norwegian Knut Hamsun and German Friedrich Griese; and in the administrative (and overtly racist) social philosophy of figures such as Walther Darré, minister for nutrition and agriculture under Hitler. While nationalist and racist, however, such agrarian populism also proved to be of little use to Hitler’s emphasis on heavy industry and remilitarization.

In the United States, the populism that arose before and after WWI shared some of the traits of its Russian precursors, and in certain ways harkened back to Andrew Jackson’s suspicion of all central banking and even further back to the states’ rights sentiments found in *The Federalist Papers.* Rallying behind William Jennings Bryan in his first run for President in 1896 on the Democratic Party ticket, the People’s Party of the 1880s and 1890s may have been the acme of left-wing American populism. Articulating the interests of farmers in the mid-West who often owed large sums of loaned capital and accrued interest to urban Eastern bankers, Bryan’s populism exploded at the 1896 convention in his impassioned “Cross of Gold” speech. Arguing that the American farmer had been economically crucified by a dogmatic adherence to the “gold standard” (by which the treasury insisted that all paper money needed to be backed by gold specie), Bryan proposed “bimetallism” (the use of silver as well as gold to guarantee monetary values), the inflationary effects of which would ease agricultural debt. The most enduringly left-leaning or “progressive” contributions of this earlier phase of populism—the desire to protect small farmers, anti-trust legislation, monetary reform, the surge in labor-union power under Samuel Gompers, new banking and stock market regulations after the crash of 1929, and finally Franklin D. Roosevelt’s federal works projects in response to the Great Depression of the 1930s—were once again debated during the Great Recession of 2008-10.

During the 1930s, American populism tended to turn toward the right. Father Charles Coughlin, the first true radio demagogue (long before Rush Limbaugh picked up his mantle) with perhaps an audience of one third of the entire country at his peak, switched in 1934 from socialist-leaning champion of labor, internationalism, and the New Deal to anti-Semitic and isolationist supporter of the Nazi cause. Only the legal machinations of Roosevelt and eventually the embarrassed Catholic Church silenced him. Both agrarian and labor populism were often hamstrung by the same racism that permeated American society at large. The political career of Louisiana Governor (1928-32), Senator (1932-35) and potential presidential candidate Huey Long (supported by Coughlin), who turned against Roosevelt just before Coughlin did, encapsulates much of populism’s ambiguity. Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946) is something of a fictional précis of that ambiguity in America, at least in its powerfully influential Southern guise. More recently, politicians such as George Wallace and Pat Buchanan, along with interest groups such as the NRA and the Tea Party, have carried on the legacy of right-wing populism, while the “Occupy” movement has tried to revive its left-wing variety.

Latin America has also hosted a large range of populist movements, both of the left and the right. Juan Peron in Argentina may be the most conspicuous example of South American populism, and Peron (followed by his first wife Evita and second wife Isabel) led a movement that was largely progressive in its achievements. At times revered, Peron supported economic equality and labor unions, instituted social security and health reforms (over a hundred hospitals were built), and strove for economic independence from the neo-colonial power of the United States. After 1949, he proposed an economic “third way” between the Cold War rivalry of the United States and the Soviet Union. But Peron had earlier expressed sympathy with the syndicalism of Mussolini and the National Socialism of Hitler, where he saw the interests of the working classes and a statist nationalism firmly wedded. And his nationalization of natural resources and a number of industries, combined with the cult of personality that turned the Labor Party into the Peronist Party, solidified the opposition of conservative elites and socialists alike, bringing about his downfall. Like Bryan on the left and Huey Long on the right, Peron’s case illustrates how easily populism produced charismatic figures who led as much by personality as by clearly defined policy.

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