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In United States history the term «populism» is classically associated with the late nineteenth century farmers' and rural protest movements that culminated in the People's Party challenge to the emergent industrial-financial hegemony in the early 1890s. Originating in labor union, farmers', and small business protests of the 1870s (Grangers, Greenbackers, the Knights of Labor, farmers' alliances, and even the Women's Christian Temperance Union) the People's Party of 1892 not only mounted the most significant third party effort since the Republicans in the 1850s, but also gave the political vocabulary the terms populist/populism.

Small «p» populism now means something different and far more extensive than capital «P» Populism. The latter refers to a movement and party that historians now judge to have been a humane, progressive attempt to enlist the aid of the state to help indebted farmers hold onto their land, to obtain credit for their crops through a subtreasury plan, to democratize politics (through the direct election of United States Senators, for example), to curb the power of railroads and telegraph companies, and to create a more equitable social order (through a progressive income tax, for example).

To refer to populist movements throughout U.S. history, however, is to invoke a huge variety of movements, large and small, reaching back to the era of the American Revolution and before. The «Regulators» of North Carolina in the 1760s would belong on the list, as well as other rural rebels whose defiance of landlords, court closings, and harassment of state officials extended during those years throughout the backcountry from New England to the Carolinas. In the antebellum period the Antimasons, Workingmen, the Dorr Rebellion in Rhode Island, New York anti-renters, Know Nothings, and parts of the temperance/prohibition movements would merit inclusion. After the waning of the People's Party in the 1890s, successive populisms show even greater variety and in some cases, such as the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, a predominantly reactionary character, that is, they are essentially reactionary populist movements.

Even in the nineteenth century populist movements often exhibited both progressive and reactionary features–notably the nativist, anti-Catholic impulses of the 1840s and 1850s that culminated in the Know Nothing or American Republican party. The Know Nothing record in Massachusetts, for example, was a stunningly incongruous mixture of intolerance toward Irish Catholics (especially the recent flood

of poverty-stricken refugees from famine), democratization of the polity, and economic and social welfare reform. While populist movements also flourished in the twentieth century, after World War II, as Michael Kazin pointed out recently in The Populist Persuasion, populist rhetoric shifted from being used by challenging groups seeking social justice to being used more often by conservative politicians defending the status quo or advancing the interests of corporations, the wealthy, or cultural reaction[1]. The Civil Rights movement (which Kazin did not consider) would be a notable exception to this trend, as well as countless regional, state, and local movements.

Before discussing further the historical contours of populist movements in the United States, it is necessary to address some distinctions regarding a concept–populism–that has proved remarkably amorphous, difficult to define, and almost impossible to apply in cross-cultural analysis. Regarding the latter problem, populism varies considerably with the national political cultures in which one finds it, and refers to very different phenomena in North America, South America, and Europe–not to mention other continents.

In 1969 an international group of scholars, in a book of essays, Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics, generally viewed their subject negatively, through lenses colored by the excesses of anti-Communist hyteria in the 1950s or of New Left incivilities in the 1960s. They also presented a variety of definitions that seemed dependent on specific national contexts, and had difficulty indentifying cross-cultural features common to different political cultures[2].

Perhaps the first sustained consideration of populism was Maragret Canovan's now well-known 1981 book, Populism. Canovan began with the recognition that the concept of populism «is exceptionally vague and refers to a bewildering variety of phenomena». She found no «fundamental unity of populism» and instead proposed a typology of several different forms of populism which, although displaying numerous overlaps and similarities as well as differences, «are not reducible to a single core». Canovan's approach actually represented the most common of three general approaches discerned by Paul Taggart in a recent text (Populism, 2000): 1) «attempts to capture the essence of populism» (which Canovan rejected); 2) a contextual aproach, or populism as specific to the circumstances in which it emerges, and 3) «variegated--with no essence but varities», which was basically Canovan's position. Almost twenty years after Canovan's book, Taggart observed that the

1 M. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, New York, Basic Books, 1995.

2 G. Ionescu, E. Gellner, *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969.

concept has received surprisingly little attention for "such a commonly used term," and, like Canovan, found «very little agreement surrounding it»[3].

The theoretical relationship of populism to democracy, not extensively explored hitherto, has received growing attention. Several of the authors of essays in the 2002 book edited by Yves Meny and Yves Surel, Democracies and the Populist Challenge, examine what they regard as an inevitable tension between democracy and populism. Although Meny, Surel and other contributors inquire as to whether populism is «the pathology of democracy», they actually locate the source of populist discontent in the inevitable disconnect or contradiction between democratic ideology on one hand and constitutional restraints and inevitably oligarchic representation on the other. The people are told by their leaders that they rule, but they do not--elites rule. The gap between «[democratic] ideology (the power of the people) and its functioning (the power of elites chosen by the people)» gives rise periodically to outbursts of populist frustration which remind us that «democracy is not a given, but a constant enterprise of adjustment to the changing needs and values of society». Indicating the caution with which any European intellectuals mount even a moderate defense of populism today, Meny and Surel, while denying that populism is a democratic sickness or crisis, still term it a «democratic malaise»[4].

Indeed, in Europe, since at least the 1980s, a flood of books, anthologies, and journal articles has rushed to raise an alarm regarding right-wing extremism and populism as one and the same. «The radical right», «the extreme right», and «the far right» are all regarded as populist archetypes who, if given the opportunity, would be tyrannical majoritarians trampling the rights of individuals. One such writer described Hitler as an early populist leader, and others routinely have assumed the continuity of contemporary European populism with fascism. In these works one searches in vain for any hint that progressive or even mixed forms of populism have existed and do exist. They seem particularly unaware of the history of populisms in the United State - or, for that matter, in North America generally - or in Latin Americ[5].

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3 M. Canovan, *Populism*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, p. 3; P. Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham (Philadelphia), Open University Press, 2000, p. 10. For an early attempt to construct a theory of populism see also: E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism-Fascism-Populism*, London, NLB, 1977, pp. 143-98; and for an early consideration of populism and representative democracy see: W. H. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism. A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*, San Francisco, Oxford Freeman, 1982.

4 Y. Meny, Y. Surel, *The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism*, in Y. Meny, Y. Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, London, Houndsmilss, 2002, pp. 3, 8, 14, 17, 21; see also M. Canovan, *Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy*, in «Political Studies», No. 47, March 1999, pp. 2-16.

5 P. Ignazi, *The Silent Counter-Revolution: Hypotheses on the Emergence of the Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Europe*, in «European Journal of Political Research», No. 22, January 1992, p. 9; G. Dahl,

The polarity between studies of populism in Europe and Latin America is particularly striking. The majority of Latin Americanists have associated populism with progressive reform almost to the degree that European social scientists now associate populism with right-wing extremism. It was not always so, as early interpretations of populism in South America stressed demagogues' manipulation of irrational and anomic masses, an approach led, not surprisingly, by a refugee from European fascism. The literature on Latin America has evolved since then, leaving behind the European parallels as well as a classification of populisms based on rather rigid categories of class composition. Many Latin Americanists now emphasize definitions of populism connoting a style of election campaigning, of mobilizing support, or of governing by charismatic leaders that involves inclusiveness and an intense bond between leaders and led[6].

Populist leaders and regimes in South America did not always promote genuine reform and were generally not revolutionary, but were usually moderately redistributionist. Some populist leaders were dictators and others oligarchs not necessarily bound by law. Yet most expanded democratic procedures by seeking mass approval through elections and, more importantly, sought to mobilize and include within the polity darker-skinned and lower-class populations that had been excluded from participation. Considering the current tendency in Europe to indict populisms as inevitably racist or xenophobic, the historical legacy of populism in many South American countries of conferring «symbolic dignity» on excluded and lower-caste groups suggests that even in Europe matters may be more complex than they seem[7].

A turn in the literature similar to that in Latin studies has occured in the interpretation of U.S. Populism (capital P). Thirty to forty years ago many historians,

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Radical Conservatism and the Future of Politics, London, SAGE, 1999, p. 95; D. Marquand, *Democracy in Britain*, «Political Quarterly», No. 71, July-September 2000, p. 275; P. Hainsworth, *The Extreme Right in Europe and the USA*, New York, Pinter, 1992; H.G. Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1994; H. Kitschelt, *The Radical Right in Western Europe*, Michigan, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995; R. Ferguson, M. Vaughn, *The Far Right in Western and Eastern Europe*, New York, Longman, 1995; P. H. Merkl, L. Weinberg, *The Revival of Right-Wing Extremism in the Nineties*, Frank Cass, London, 1997; P. Hainsworth, *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, London, Pinter, 2000.

6 T.S. Di Tella, *Populism and Reform in Latin America*, in C. Veliz, *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*, London, Oxford UP, 1965, p. 74; C. De La Torre, *The Ambiguous Meanings of Latin American Populisms*, «Social Research», No. 59, Summer 1992 pp. 305-413; A. Knight, *Populism and neo-Populism in Latin America*, especially Mexico, in «Journal of Latin American Studies», No. 30, May 1998, pp. 223-24.

7 M. L. Coniff, *Introduction: Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism*, in M. L. Coniff, *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1982, pp. 5-7, 12-13, 22; M.L. Coniff, *Introduction*, in M. L. Coniff, *Populism in Latin America*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1999, pp. 6-7, 21.

reflecting a loss of faith in mass publics and democratic majorities, viewed the North American Populists of the 1890s as illiberal presursors of McCarthyism and anti-Communist paranoia. In the 1950s, especially, intellectuals reacting to both the pre-war totalitarians and fascist movements as well as the excesses of the Red Scare in their midst, distrusted populist movements of all kinds. Since the 1970s, however, a far more favorable interpretation has gained ascendency regarding 1890s Populism. While minor points of contention persist, recent books of synthesis by Gene Clanton, Robert C. McMath, Jr., Norman Pollack, and Elizabeth Sanders, as well as several influential monographs, indicate that any debates are conducted within an understanding of the basically republican and progressive nature of Populism. Clanton, for example, termed it a «humane preference»[8].

The agrarian protest ovements of the late nineteenth century that culminated in the People's Party campaigns of 1890-96 expressed the producerist ideology that had animated many reformist and challenging movements since the antebellum period and before. Producerism was the ideology of artisans, mechanics, farmers, small businessmen and professional allies that valued work and asked for a «competency», that is, the ability to support one's family, maintain respectability, and achieve middling status through hard work and education. It crossed class and occupational lines

and excluded only middle men, saloon keepers, profiteers, and the idle rich who lived off the fruit of others' labor. Factory owners who managed their own enterprises could be regarded as part of the «great army of the producing classes».

Producerist populism, though not without flaws, could be a profoundly radical critique of the new industrial-financial system and its lopsided socio-economic and political power, but it was not a critique that was anti-capitalist. Farmers who joined Farmers' Alliances and voted for the People's Party wanted, after all, to preserve their farm ownership, as well as to place significant limits on the unregulated power of railroads, large corporations, and capitalists. Their currency and credit proposals invited the federal government to expand its power to preserve their way of life. Their rhetoric and values remained rooted in republican, liberal, and evangelical Protestant traditions as well as the small producer ethos of the nineteenth century. In turning to the federal government with proposals such as the Subtreasury system they were asking it, as Christopher Lasch pointed out, to give them the ability to help themselves[9].

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8 G. Clanton, *Populism: the Human Preference in America 1890-1900*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1991.

9 C. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1991; C. Lasch, *Liberalism and Civic Virtue*, in «Telos», No. 88, Summer 1991, pp. 57-68.

The populism of the 1880s and 1890s may be regarded as a classic expression of progressive populism: it mobilized on a widespread scale ordinary people, men and women, encouraged engagement and participation, and it was energized by what political scientists would label a sense of efficacy, a confidence that their political activity could make a difference. At the same time Populism also gathered into its fold and expressed in its rhetoric some of the illiberal impulses abroad in American society in the late nineteenth century. As the critical historians of the 1950s and 1960s pointed out to excess, Populist writers and speakers at times expressed nativism, anti-Semitism, and a hyperbolic belief in conspiracy. In the South, the politics of race eventually ensnared Populists in its ugly coils. At first, however, some Populists succeeded in bridging, at least for a time, racial caste barriers by appealing to the common economic interests (and political) of white and African American farmers. But the racial backlash from the dominant Democrats, often carried forward with electoral fraud and violence, either defeated the reformers or caused them to abandon and even to turn against potential black allies. Yet various prejudices and stereotypes existed throughout white Protestant society, and the major parties hardly refrained from hyperbolic exaggerations.

The larger point is that populist movements in U.S. history which have been predominantly progressive, humane and directed toward social justice also have contained reactionary features to some degree, though not enough to change our understanding of their basic character as progressive. The reverse combination or weighting of features may be seen in an early mass movement of the twentieth century that scholars have reinterpreted recently within a populist framework. The revisionist view of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, a reactionary populist movement, also may be instructive for scholars of Europe's new right or neo-populist parties. In the past three decades several historians have overturned the traditional view of the Second Klan as an abnormal, temporary outburst of anti-black racism and right-wing extremism and have replaced it with (an unattractive but different) image of the Klan as a «mainstream social movement that drew support from a wide cross-section of the nation's white Protestant society». Revisionist studies have rejected «status anxiety and social pathology as explanations for the Klan's extraordinary popularity and political influence», and instead have emphasized «continuity between the Klan's bigotry and that of broader white, and white Protestant society». The new studies, focusing on localities as disparate as Ohio, Indiana, Utah, Los Angeles, and El Paso, Texas, have shown that the movement drew strength not only from concerns abou race and the growing influence of Jews, Catholics, and ethnic groups, «but from a startlingly long list of additional, sometimes highly localized grievances concerning law enforcement, vice and public morality - particularly in regard to Prohibition

enforcement, political corruption, the power of business elites to dictate community affairs, disruptions to traditional community institutions and values, challenges to traditional gender roles, and even popular demands for public services such as modern schools, paved roads, and new sewer lines»[10]. The revisionists, as well as other scholars taking a different approach, have not ignored the Klan's intolerance and bigotry, but the emphasis on its populist character in effect has positioned the Second Klan much neared to the mainstream of U.S. political culture (ironically in view of the tendency of many intellectuals to use the populist label to marginalize similar movements).

Thus the 1920s Klan qualifies as a case of a reactionary populist movement. It contained, in certain localities, not just populist features but even those that can be labeled reformist or progressive, e.g. demands for better schools of improved public infrastructure. But on balance, the Second Klan expressed illiberal, reactionary impulses.

The characteristic populist movement of the 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), presents a stark contrast to the KKK, enlisting many kinds of persons - urban, ethnic, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish - that the Klan men and women believed endangered what they viewed as traditional American values. The CIO was populist and progressive firstly in its industrial organizational focus, its effort to unionize basic industries (automobiles, steel, gaol, garment, textiles) from the bottom up. Its predecessor, the American Federation of Labor, had welcomed only skilled workers, but the CIO no longer distance itself from the unskilled and the immigrant poor. Tens of thousands of workers went on strike in the Great Depression and organized themselves with or without the AFL's blessing - the CIO took them in. In addition, the CIO was not only multi-ethnic, but also seriously tried to overcome entreched racial barriers by bringing in African American workers. «Such heterogenity», observed Kazin, helped promote the idea that the CIO was not a narrow interest group focused on the workplace but the core of a grander 'people's movement' - of small farmers, local politicians, working - and middle-class consumers, and even some small employers--that sought to level the heights of concentrated wealth and push the New Deal [of Franklin Roosevelt] further leftward»[11].

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10 L.J. Moore, *Good Old-Fashioned Social History and the Twentieth-Century American Right*, in «Reviews in American History», No. 24, December 1996, p. 560; L.J Moore, *Historical Interpretation of the 1920s Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision*, in «Journal of Social History», No. 24, Winter 1990, pp. 341-57.

11 M. Kazin, cit., p. 137.

During the economic hardships of the 1930s many other grass roots movements tried to influence national or state politics. Suffice it to say that these populisms exhibited many conflicting tendencies, internally as well as vis a vis one another.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1940s to the 1960s, although based primarily among blacks in the South, can be regarded as a populist movement seeking to further some of the loftier goals of the CIO. Even the conventional view of the post-World War II Civil Rights movement that posits a «Birmingham (1955) to Selma (1965)» paradigm is open to this understanding. But several works of recent scholarship focused on African American «local people» have added weight to the argument that the black struggle against racial discrimination and second class citizenship was a progressive populist movement. In small and large places across the South blacks had been pushing against the caste barriers of white supremacy in the 1930s and 1940s, laying the bases for community based activism and protests that gathered momentum in the 1950s and 1960s. As the movement gathered national attention in the 1960s, it attracted white allies, but the latter were not usually participants at the grass roots.

In the North, the white counterpart to the Southern Civil Rights movement became in the 1960s and 1970s the phenomenon known as the «white backlash». In cities across the country from the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast whites reacted to black demands for desegregated (or just better) schools, fair housing, and equal employment opportunities with often fierce resistannce. City officials and school boards delayed, denied, and obstructed, while white neighborhood groups often mobilized grass roots movements to keep African Americans out, away, or separate. Often appealing to class resentments and claiming reverse discrimination these outbursts tended to typify reactionary populist movements[12].

The focus of this essay thus far has been on the tendencies of populist social movements throughout United States history. Kazin's Populist Persuasion, the most general contemporary study of American populism, differs from the approach here because it examines many of the most prominent leaders and groups who, since the middle of the nineteenth century, have used populist rhetoric to advance a cause, group, or themselves. Kazin noted that the subjects of his study were not themselves populists «in the way they were unionists or socialists, Protestants of Catholics», rather they were those who «employed populism as a flexible means of

12 R.P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: race, Class and Etnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina University Press, 1994; prima edizione 1991.

persuasion»[13]. Above all, they presented themselves as champions of the whole people.

This strategy allowed Kazin, in the second part of his book, to highlight an important change in the nation's political culture after World War II, a shift toward conservatism that marked a sea - change away from the high tides of liberalism running from the New Deal to the Great Society of the 1960s. Space does not permit consideration of the many causes contributing to what in effect was the unravelling of the New Deal voter coalition, but a prominent feature of the changing political terrain was that in the late 1940s, as Kazin observed, «populism [i.e., populist rhetoric] began a migration from Left to Right. The rhetoric once spoken primarily by reformers and radicals (debt-ridden farmers, craft and industrial unionists, socialists attempting to make their purposes sound American, even prohibitonists eager to wipe out the saloon interests) was creatively altered by conservative groups and politicians (zealous anti-Communists, George Wallace, the Christian Right, and the campaigns and presidential administrations of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan)»[14].

Kazin joined other historians as well as political scientists in pointing to the crucial role played in this transformation by George Wallace, who emerged in the mid-1960s as one of the foremost symbols of the white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement, as well as against the youth rebellion, the counter culture, and other political and cultural phenomena of the 1960s. Although the foundation of Wallace's appeal was racial - he had notoriously proclaimed «segregation forever» in 1961 as Alabama governor - he drew together a host of resentments festering among white workers and ethnic groups, many of them traditionally Democrats, against liberal cultural and social elites, intellectuals, social engineers, Washington bureaucrats, and activist judges. Factors other than Wallace's campaigns in the Democratic primaries in 1964, and then as an indepedent presidential candidate in 1968 and 1972 contributed to the rhetorical shift, but when it was effected the result was «remarkable.... The vocabulary of grassroots rebellion», said Kazin, «now served to thwart and reverse social and cultural change rather than to promote it»[15].

As astute as this remark is, it needs qualification. Viewed from the perspective of national politics it is largely correct. At the state and local level, however, considerable amendment is necessary. But before getting to that point, it should be said that even at the national level the generalization overlooks the progressive 1980s campaigns of Jesse Jackson in the Democratic primaries and the ongoing

13 M. Kazin, cit., p. 3.

14 Ivi, p. 4.

15 Ivi, p. 4.

grassroots movement Jackson inspired to work for social justice at the national and local level. Jackson's sustained protest against the economic and racial policies of the Reagan administration, which policies in fact led to a widening of the gap between the rich and poor, have been viewed as echoing traditional American populism[16]. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, too, a term limits movement took off across the country, directed against professional politicians in state legislatures and Congress, and supported by both liberals and conservatives (though conservatives provided most of the organization and money). By 1994 thirty-four states enacted some kind of term limits legislation, and though the Supreme Court soon decided that only Congress could limit Congressional terms, the limits on state representatives persisted.

The same kind of populist anger that fueled the term limits movement simultaneously brought wealthy businessman Ross Perot to the fore as an independent candidate for president in 1992. Although Perot himself was conservative and a former Republican whose career had benefited from his connections with political leaders such as Richard Nixon, his supporters too were motivated by frustration and anger with professional politicans. His proposals were hardly radical - a balanced budget, opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), run the government like a business - but he appealed strongly to working- and middle-class Americans who felt left behind by the Reagan bonanza for millionaries of the 1980s, and threatened by elite (and bipartisan) policies such as NAFTA that also seemed destined to aid the better off. More study needs to be devoted to the range of reforms entertained by many of his supporters, some of which were progressive, before historians write off the Perot phenomenon as simply another case of simple-minded, conservative populism. After withdrawing from the presidential election for what the media presented as eccentric reasons bordering on looniness, after re-entry he still managed to attract 19 percent of the national vote

But Kazin's claim that the language of «grassroots rebellion» now was used to «thwart and reverse social and cultural change» misses the countless populist movements of the latter half of the twentieth century that have sprung up in states, cities, towns, suburbs, and neighborhoods. They have been both progressive, reactionary, and mixed: strikes seeking economic justice against multinational corporations, sometimes engulfing entire local communities (and sometimes dividing them bitterly; «NIMBYS», or local not-in-my-backyard short-lived protests against the building of a Walmart or McDonald's or the siting of a power plant or a half-way house; countless (sadly) white backlash movements against school desegregation or

16 A. D. Hertske, *Echoes of Discontent: Jesse Jackson*, Pat Robertson and the Resurgence of Populism,

fair housing ordinances or the opening of public housing to minorities; the reactionary taxpayers' revolt in California in the 1970s; and the use of the initiative and referendum in other states by both progressive and reactionary grass roots movements.This list could go on and on[17].

Thus the United States presents no one populist tradition in the case of social movements, but Kazin has demonstrated that a unified tradition of populist rhetoric has permeated American politics from the nineteenth century through to the present, made use of by all kinds of groups and political leaders. Against a coherent language of populism, however, and making good use of it, stands an enormous variety of movements, progressive, reactionary, and mixed, inhabiting virtually every level of polity and society.

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Washington, Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993.

17 Many sources might be mentioned here, but see especially: T. Goebel, *A Government by the People: Direct Democracy in America, 1890-1940*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina University Press, 2002.